CHAPTER 8

Onboarding and Supporting Students

I feel most creative when I am happy.

—Michael Saddler, 5th Grade

WHY DO WE NEED TO ONBOARD "DIGITAL NATIVES"?

The assumption that students, as digital natives, are instinctively "good at" technology can cause teachers to presume a higher level of competency and comfort using digital tools than students actually have. While it may be true that students have more familiarity in using tech tools, their skills may be more social and recreational. The skills required to succeed in an academic environment are related to those social skills; however, moving students into digital spaces under the assumption of readiness based on their recreational use of technology can set them up for failure. Further, as GettingSmart.com blogger Dave Guymon points out in "6 Mistakes You Might Be Making with Technology Integration," it is our responsibility to plan a bridge across the "digital divide" for students who do not have home access to the internet:

> Introducing a new device, app, or the internet itself still requires that we pay attention to equity issues and differentiation. . . . Incorporating support mechanisms for technology use into instructional designs and lesson plans is now just as important as doing the same for subject matter practice. Rather than viewing ourselves as 'Digital Immigrants' and our students as 'Digital Natives,' it would serve all of us well to accept the fact that we all are, in our own ways, 'Digital Explorers. (Guymon, 2014, para. 3)

In order for students and teachers to thrive in a blended learning environment, it is necessary to build capacity for both "Digital Explorer" groups through thoughtful onboarding practices. Students need skills specific to the different blended learning models we discuss in Part 3: Blended Learning— Exploring Classroom Models. For example, the face-to-face interactions of

the rotation models provide more opportunity for hands-on teacher support as students build their digital learning competencies. For instance, if a student was struggling to submit work or complete assignments within a Learning Management System, a teacher would observe this struggle and intervene through a face-to-face conference. As students move into fully or mostly online classes like an *A La Carte Model,* their skillset must strengthen to accommodate the increased independence requisite to successful online learning. Schools can bridge this skill gap for students by first analyzing the skillset required in each environment, then creating a roadmap to build these skills through onboarding practices.

This chapter

- defines onboarding and how it applies to a blended learning setting;
- outlines the skills, training, and support students need for each blended learning model and how to define the expectations within each;
- applies Understanding by Design (UbD) framework to student onboarding practices;
  - Identify desired results
  - Determine assessment evidence
  - Design learning experience
- explores examples of student onboarding practices in action; and
- outlines strategies for embracing student mistakes as teachable moments.

Student onboarding is required through all three phases of the *Blended Learning Roadmap* as new tools are introduced, students transition from one grade to another, and new students enter the school. However, it is especially important to consider onboarding at the school level when moving from Phase 1: Foundations to Phase 2: Transitions.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ONBOARDING?

In the business world, the term "onboarding" refers to specific practices used by organizations to successfully help recent employees enter their new work environment. Through this process, employers strive to reduce any uncertainty and anxiety of the newcomers, help them make sense of their new environment, and provide them with the necessary tangible and intangible resources to become successful organizational members in their new role.

As schools introduce new digital platforms and tools, new learning environments are born, and in each case, students become newcomers to these

environments. It is therefore beneficial to apply best practices in onboarding to these situations, strategically positioning students for success in their new workspaces.

School leaders and teachers can meet the three objectives of onboarding a group of students into a new environment through practices which provide training, opportunity to define behavioral expectations, and ongoing support. Figure 8.1 illustrates student outcomes and support structures that serve these three outcomes in a rotation or Individual Playlist Model, where the teacher has a substantial amount of face-to-face time with students and is able to monitor and respond to student needs within the classroom.

FIGURE 8.1 Onboarding for Primarily Face-to-Face Experiences

TRAIN	DEFINE	SUPPORT
• how to access digital tools and class resources • how to use new tools effectively • how to smoothly transition between activities • how to organize different digital spaces	• share objectives for using new tools • engage students in setting use expectations • connect digital citizenship learning to new tools • model and communicate community norms	• help students organize digital spaces • provide communication tools for students to reach teachers • monitor student interaction and engage in discussions • scaffold responsibilities to grow with students

This set of objectives and activities looks different in a model where students are primarily receiving instruction online. For a student to successfully complete an online course, the skills built in a primarily face-to-face setting are prerequisite while the following skills are even more critical:

- Ability to take initiative and work independently

- Time management and the ability to break down larger projects into their components

- Self-advocacy and resourcefulness in seeking help when needed

- Ability to troubleshoot minor tech issues (or access support) and use digital tools provided

- Ability to comprehend and apply learning material presented through video and written instruction

The expanded skill set for a primarily online experience mandates a different approach to onboarding and supporting students. Figure 8.2 outlines the student outcomes and support structures teachers may consider in orienting and training students for this type of setting.

FIGURE 8.2 Onboarding for Primarily Online Experiences

TRAIN	DEFINE	SUPPORT
• how to access course resources • how a login and participate in online discussions • how to seek help and communicate effectively • how to collaborate online	• course objectives and work expectations • teacher-student communication protocol • constituent (student, onsite facilitator, online teacher) responsibilities • class participation responsibilities and protocol	• help students organize deliverable deadlines • provide an onsite facilitator • monitor student interaction • promote peer leadership and expertise

Onboarding Through Effective Backward Design

We can apply McTighe and Wiggins' *Understanding by Design* (UbD) framework to designing the student onboarding experience: identify the transfer goals and essential questions, assess evidence of understanding and plan learning instruction for onboarding into each type of blended learning environment. In identifying the transfer goals for students in the introduction of new technology, teachers should view the gap as one in understanding and purpose rather than one of adoption. As digital natives, students are quick to adopt technology, but need to build a bridge which allows them to use it effectively in academic settings.

Tiffany: I experienced an adoption versus purpose gap myself a few years ago when first exploring Instagram with my students. I was new to Instagram and had a vision for the aesthetics of my feed, but a complete disregard for hashtags or likes. My students, on the other hand, were masters of sharing and cultivating a following. They liked my pics and schooled me on how to share effectively, link up with other like-minded "grammers," and build a community following. I was fascinated by their skillset, but couldn't help but notice their often complete disregard for content curation or purpose. Just as I couldn't answer their questions on why I didn't use hashtags, they couldn't explain what they were trying to say on their feeds.

We started a project together to explore the purposeful use of Instagram for social good, forming a feed for our "Finding Green" urban parks project and beginning a hashtag #findinggreennyc. Through this project, they taught me about sharing and community building, and I taught them about messaging

and curating content by design. One of these students went on to establish a robust IG following of 60K+ users and is now an active member of a global photographer community with a highly marketable brand and skill.

Stage 1 of UbD Planning: Identify Desired Results

Using the training goals from Figure 8.1 as a starting point or launching pad for a mostly face-to-face environment, teachers can pose the following essential questions to students to begin to build this bridge:

- What similarities between the offline and online environments can we draw to further understand digital learning spaces?

- What opportunities are presented through the use of online learning, and what responsibilities accompany these opportunities?

- What is each person's role within a learning environment, and how do these look in both a face-to-face and online setting?

- What are the expectations for working with others offline, and how can we apply these to digital learning spaces?

- What skills from our experience as face-to-face learners can we apply to new online learning experiences?

- What can we do to maximize our learning in both face-to-face and online spaces?

- What can we do to stay connected with our teachers and get the support needed in both offline and online learning spaces?

Stage 2 of UbD Planning: Determine Assessment Evidence

Following the UbD model, teachers can move backwards from the target goals to determine evidence of understanding and a means of observing such evidence. For example, teachers should look for evidence, such as responsive communication, respectful dialogue, compromise, group focus, and shared responsibility for work product when positive productive online collaboration is the goal. The question then becomes: *How can teachers effectively assess this evidence?* There are numerous means of making this assessment, starting with observations and feedback from the same collaboration indicators in face-to-face interactions with the class. As students explore the essential question: *What are the expectations for working with others offline, and how can we apply these to digital learning spaces?,* teachers can have students form a group collaboration contract before working together, and then self-assess after collaborative learning in the face-to-face setting. From this practice, students can then draw connections to an online sharing space with
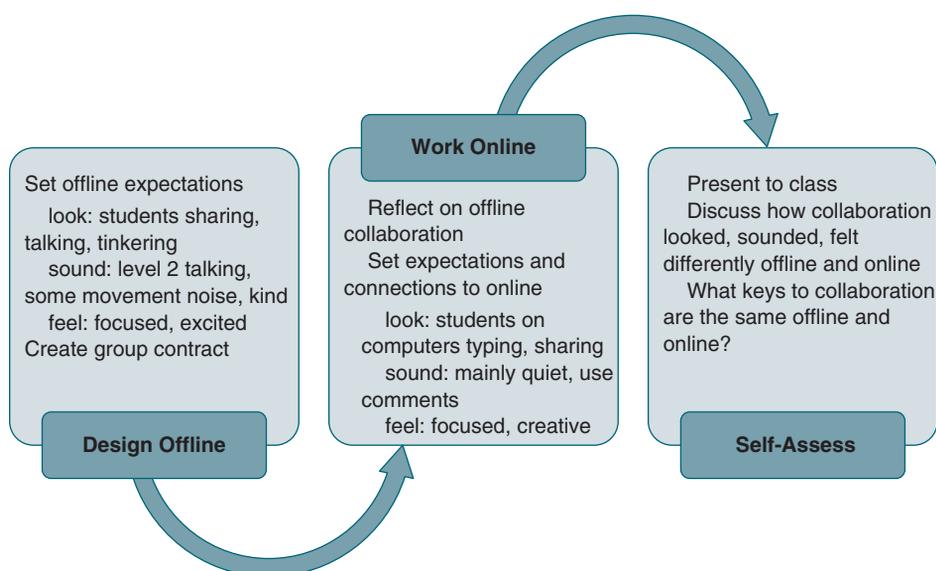
teacher guidance. The use of a Venn Diagram or Look/Sound/Feel chart to explore the similar and different collaboration expectations between the two environments can also serve as an assessment of understanding.

Stage 3 of UbD Planning: Design Learning Experience

The learning experience can now be built from the evidence of understanding. Taking into consideration the aforementioned collaboration goal, it is advantageous to provide a learning experience that allows for both face-to-face collaboration and online collaboration so that students make the connection between effective practices in both spaces. Further, taking time between the two experiences to reflect on collaboration practices strengthens this connection as students move from one environment to the other.

For example, in science class, students may be tasked to work together on the design of a balloon-powered car, proceeding through the stages of collaboration and iteration in a face-to-face setting. The group can then move to a shared document or slideshow to collaborate on a summary and presentation. Prior to beginning, teachers should set the stage for how collaboration should look/sound/feel in the classroom and review guidelines for respectful communication and compromise in groups. Following the group work session, students can prepare for the transition to the online setting by making connections between the two forms of collaboration. Each facet of communication should be addressed, including purpose, tone, language, and inclusiveness. Figure 8.3 presents a flow of how this science lesson could transition through the two environments.

FIGURE 8.3 A Blended Workflow

Work Online

Design Offline

Set offline expectations
   look: students sharing, talking, tinkering
   sound: level 2 talking, some movement noise, kind
   feel: focused, excited
Create group contract

Reflect on offline collaboration
   Set expectations and connections to online
   look: students on computers typing, sharing
      sound: mainly quiet, use comments
      feel: focused, creative

Self-Assess

Present to class
   Discuss how collaboration looked, sounded, felt differently offline and online
   What keys to collaboration are the same offline and online?

LINKS TO LEADERSHIP: ESTABLISHING A SCHOOLWIDE ONBOARDING PRACTICE

As technology instruction moves out of the silo of its computer lab origins, school leaders must establish schoolwide practices for instructing students on the academic use of technology tools by integrating the learning objectives into the school's curricular scope and sequence, and by allotting time for onboarding in the schedule each year.

We can safely assume the likelihood of a student taking an online course at some point in their academic careers. With the rise in K–12 online enrollment from just forty five thousand to over three million from 2000 to 2009, and a continued year over year increase expected since, this student experience may arrive well before college (Horn & Staker, 2011, p. 1). Keeping in mind the academic end goal of success in an online class, schools can design a crescendo of online learning beginning at an early age so that students build the skills needed to succeed in online learning over time and with teacher support in their face-to-face environments. In scaffolding this learning and building it into the program at a grade-by-grade level, school leaders need to consider how much time, in what subjects, and in what models the learning will take place. These considerations and probing questions are outlined in Figure 8.4.

FIGURE 8.4   Scaffolding Online Learning Curricular Integration

Proportion	How much time in each learning mode is ideal for the school's unique school mission and learning environment? For example, if a school's main modes of instruction are composed of teacher-based instruction, project-based learning (PBL), and computer-based instruction, a Kindergarten class may have a much smaller proportion of online learning than an Eighth-Grade class in the same school.
Subject	In what classes will each objective be met? For example, in scaffolding participation in online discussions, schools may focus initially on building this skill through book clubs in the literacy program, and then opening discussions in other subjects, later introducing peers outside the school, as students get older or more competent in their skills.
Schedule	Will learning take place solely in the classes, or will there be dedicated time to tech training? How will new students onboard into existing programs? For example, schools may integrate training into student orientation programs, or dedicate specific days of the year for this type of onboarding.

Build Capacity Through Student Trailblazers and Buddy Programs

In the same way that teacher trailblazers are vital to building capacity in faculty culture, so too are student trailblazers vital in sampling the proper use of technology in class. Students who are quickly able to understand and

use platforms can provide guidance and modeling for their peers or younger students. Buddy programs which pair an older and younger class are a great way to build community and capacity for onboarding students into platforms for online learning. For example, older students could help coach younger ones using a math software like Khan Academy in a math buddy program.

Engage Students in Peer Support Systems

As students build aptitude for using technology in an academic setting and an understanding of the unique blended learning culture of their school, they can emerge as partners in ongoing technology support. A student-run help desk is a great way to empower students in shared responsibility around technology integration.

Leader Vignette: Tiffany Wycoff, Academic Bootcamp

@TeachOnTheEdge

Since stepping into the role of school leader in a blended learning environment, I build in time for onboarding practices throughout the year. While much is integrated into the regular schedule, I achieved success by providing a few experiences dedicated to technology training and expectation definition. One of these constructs is what we call the "Academic Bootcamp" day at the beginning of each year.

Academic Bootcamp takes place the first week of school and is a dedicated day to building universal skills to help students succeed for the year. Some of the skills change year to year while others are consistent due to their core nature; however, all are applicable across disciplines.

	CONSISTENT	VARIES YEAR TO YEAR
Platform Use	Google Drive—Organizing Calendar Documents—Sharing and Collaborating Schoology—Discussions Schoology—Work and Grades	Prezi Instagram Google Sheets Google Forms Padlet iMovie Quizlet
Digital Citizenship	Explore and Define Collaborate on a Digital Citizenship or Class Contract	
Academic Skills	Study Skills (approaches vary from art integration to more traditional forms) Academic Integrity	Learning Style Inventory Sketch Notes Outlining Research Paraphrasing

To keep scheduling changes to a minimum for the day, each discipline is assigned one objective to cover. All the math teachers might cover Calendar, the English teachers Drive, history teachers Schoology discussions, and so on. The visual arts or performing arts teachers participate by incorporating study skills in the style of their art (i.e. sketchnoting, visualization, or use of song).

At our school, we use one day for this, but it would also work to spread it out over a week or a couple days, especially if a block schedule is in place. For elementary school children, introducing one application at a time over a longer period of time is more developmentally appropriate. This way, students can get used to one tool and build proficiency in using it before learning a new one.

Embracing Teachable Moments

In a blended learning environment, there must be a conscious effort to engage with students in digital spaces and to encourage them to explore within established age-appropriate boundaries. There is also a recognition that students sometimes step beyond these boundaries, using technology in ways that violate the school's honorable use agreement. Educators can model and practice exemplary interaction within learning spaces, drawing connection to social media use outside of school. In more traditional settings, students can only draw from their social media experiences, and chances are that there are few if any adults modeling the correct behavior for the child.

The goal of onboarding students is not to eliminate mistakes altogether. Inevitably, students make mistakes as they learn to navigate both learning and social spaces as digital citizens. School leaders and teachers should anticipate and embrace these moments as fail-forward opportunities. The digital exploration boundaries should expand as a child grows older much in the way that explore-alone boundaries in the community expand as a child ages. For example, a child living in New York City first learns to navigate his immediate neighborhood, perhaps traveling a few blocks home from school on his own by fifth grade. In the years between this milestone and high school, he likely learns to navigate most of the city via the complicated network of subways so that he can confidently and safely travel to and from a school, which is unlikely to be a neighborhood school. Children benefit from the same type of expanding exploratory nucleus in the digital world, with the idea that they navigate an area of relative safety through the age-appropriate circumference. By setting up social learning spaces like discussion boards where both teachers and students interact online, schools provide such a supervised circumference for students to learn how to interact with others online. When mistakes are made within this space, an adult is there to help the child reflect on the error and learn forward from the failure.

Parents can become fearful of potential risks as schools incorporate social learning spaces into their curriculum. It is important for school leaders and teachers to build an understanding and appreciation for the digital world's teachable moments into the teacher and parental culture of the school. Here are some ways to accomplish this:

- Incorporate commitment to growth mindset in the Honorable Use Policy (as opposed to zero-tolerance).

- Ensure teachers are able to monitor and engage in school digital community spaces so that when students post something of concern, there is awareness of the interaction and an opportunity for teachers to redirect and model a better standard for interaction.

- In parent workshops, help parents understand the benefit of the "growing nucleus of exploration," and engage them as partners to help build this nucleus.

- Encourage parents to create honorable use policies with their children in a Digital Home Contract.

- Encourage parents to reference age regulations from social media sites to set boundaries for children. Parents often feel pressured to allow underage use of social media sites because "everyone is doing it." A family account can be a great compromise for usage and can open an opportunity for modeling, discussion, collaborative learning, and shared responsibility.

- When mistakes happen, take time to explore the situation through meaningful dialogue with the students involved so that reflection and learning can take place.

WRAPPING IT UP

As much as today's children use technology, there is still a need to instruct them on the purposeful use of it in an academic setting. The management of online resources and learning platforms can present new challenges for students and require support from teachers. As schools incorporate blended learning models into the curriculum, it is valuable to keep these support needs in mind and as they are introduced to create a protocol for onboarding students into new digital tools. Onboarding practices include training activities, outlining of expectations, and structuring ongoing support.

There are many benefits to such a practice, including increased student confidence and comfort in the space, more efficient implementation and faster launch to learning, clearer expectations between offline and online spaces,

and further development of 21st-century skills. School leaders and teachers can use backward design in planning onboarding activities and assessments to meet the targeted outcomes. Schools should consider both the short-term and long-term goals and skills students need to succeed in online classes in the future as they design onboarding practices for students.

BOOK STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the assumptions teachers and school leaders make about students and technology? How can we challenge these assumptions?

2. What are some tech skills students seem to have before they enter your class? Are there students who have not developed these skills? How can you plan to differentiate onboarding?

3. What are the uses of technology where you see students sometimes falter or struggle? Think of one activity to help strengthen that skill for students.

4. What types of onboarding practices are ideal to start with in your school given the current state of blended learning? What practices are important to consider as your school's blended learning practices evolve?

5. What similarities can be drawn between helping students adjust to a new classroom and a new digital learning space? What current practices do you use to introduce students to your class which could be used to acclimate students to an online space?