

Teaching Online During the Coronavirus Outbreak using the Steiner-Method

Guidance and Suggestions for Teachers

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Introduction

These suggestions and guidelines are part of a longer-term writing project. They have been hurried into print in the light of quickly unfolding events (so forgive the occasional typo that the spellchecker missed).

Teaching using digital technology is appropriate when used consciously and selectively for upper school students. With schools closing around the world and studying from home becoming the new norm, at least for the coming weeks, and possibly months, offering education online is becoming a default position for state schools, and now also many Waldorf Schools. Current events also will put pressure on Waldorf Schools to make use of digital technology to teach children of much younger ages.

This short document is not an attempt to tell experienced Waldorf Teachers how to carry out their calling. Nevertheless, teaching "online" as a replacement for physical classroom education is not natural, even alien to the Waldorf pedagogy, and for good reason. Rudolf Steiner, a long time before computers appeared in our lives, pointed to the danger to us all of becoming too immersed in the binary (on-off, 1-zero, either-or) nature of mechanistic technology. Our world is qualitative. Digital technology is binary and our screens flash on and off at a speed beyond our normal perception.

It is appropriate for older children to get to know this technology, to learn how it works and to learn how and when to use it. But don't want our children to become addicted to computer technology. Yet it is also a gift of our age. It is digital technology that will be the main tool in finding a vaccine for this manifestation of Coronavirus; it is digital technology that connects even when we are physically isolated from each other.

The contents below are relevant primarily for 9s and over. It is for teachers to decide what to make use of and for what age group.

There are so many research studies and books about the dangers of digital technology for our children. Yet this is the generation that knows how to use it

often far more than we, the older ones do. They take to it quickly and many children show a resilience to its effect.

We are born into the age in which we live and digital technology presents itself to all teachers a means of continuing to teach, when we cannot be in the same physical space as our pupils.

I invite you to make use of any of these tips, suggestions and guidelines, offered as they are in a spirit of urgency but also humbleness. You are the teachers, holding the uniqueness and freedom of each child with a sacred commitment and responsibility. This technology is hugely powerful and its forces are a mixed blessing. Only with a strong effort to be self-aware, caring and kind, can we use it during these difficult times to the benefit of the children in our care.

The urgent need to share the content in this article has meant it is presented in a short, readable form with little time to thoroughly work out a structure and to work through the material. It is essentially a list of suggestions, tips and guidelines for Waldorf teachers attempting to teach online. In this document you'll find practical advice for minimising the harm a digital approach can do, as well as infusing the coldness of a digital medium with human warmth.

I hope you find it useful immediately!

About the Author

I am a parent at a Waldorf School and have been a trustee on and off for over twenty years. I also work with adults in learning and development and work as a part-time senior lecturer and associates at three universities in the United Kingdom. I am the author of several books, including "Digital Inferno" which is published by Clairview Books. My forthcoming book "Breathing Nature in a Digital World" looks at how we can balance technology and nature in our personal and working lives.

Note

Many Waldorf pupils are comfortable with the digital mode of communication, especially video conferencing and one to one video chat. Here are some practical ideas for using this medium. You'll also find ideas for setting and managing work by email.

Your own judgement will decide whether to use an idea, to adapt it, or how appropriate it is for different age groups.

Please feel free to pass this document to fellow teachers and colleagues. For transparency, please quote the author.

You are welcome to address comments and feedback to the author:
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The Ideas, Suggestions and Activities

Activity: Share our location

At the start of a conference call, share your location with the children. You might move the camera to show you are in the kitchen, or near some natural light. Ground them from the start in the fact that we are physical beings in a physical world, using a digital medium. Ask each student to say and, if appropriate, show where they are located. The lowest risk version of this is simply to say aloud where you are.

If you are emailing students you can do a similar thing. Start the email as if you are a traditional pen pal: "I am writing this from the bench in my back garden." For younger children, an email can be read out by a parent (in all cases for younger children and you can be more imaginative, creating pictures for the children as they listen or read the email. "I am writing this from the bench in my back garden, and I can see a rather large ginger cat walking along a fence as if it is tightrope walking!" For younger children you could tell a back story of how you come to be meeting them at this screen at this moment!

Suggestion: Prioritise voice over video

Radio has been on the rise in recent years. Podcasts are all the rage. They leave our ability to create imaginative pictures to us, whereas TV offers those pictures to us ready formed. For older children, record an audio, and even experiment with a group Skype call on audio without video. That can work for pedagogical stories. You can also ask parents to read stories and poems aloud that you have emailed them. Sound over vision minimises bright screen time.

Video can create passivity in even older children. Audio requires them to be more active. Parents can get involved or just be in on the call too which can encourage attention.

Activity: Do a time check

If emailing children some work to do, tell them when you are sending it – it reminds them that you have a life, just like them, and that is something common between you as human beings. "I am sending this email at 5pm, just before I have an early supper". Of course, you don't need to do this for every message. Short informational emails can be just that. But longer ones that are for setting work, can create a connection that makes them realise that an email is received a while after it was sent. In a classroom we share the same time. Awareness of time is also important online as we can lose our sense of it easily and "float", somewhere detached from the world we share on Earth.

Activity: What did we have for supper and other rhythms

Anchoring back into the physical world is helpful to children in terms of being conscious that digital technology is ultimately located in our physical world, and in a day that began with us waking and ends with going to sleep. What time did we all wake this morning? What did we eat for lunch? What is for supper? Go and ask dad or mum...

Activity: How are we feeling?

At the start of a video conference-based lesson, check in with the children. Ask each how they are feeling (you can do a "round" or if they are shy, you can ask them to write up to three words to describe it). Model this yourself. It is a reminder that we all have feelings. The shyness can create some energy, anticipation and even laughter. Tell us something that made you laugh today, then something that made you frown...

Activity: Start with a quote/a picture/a poem

People arrive at video calls at different times. On some platforms you can "share your screen". So, start with a picture, perhaps thematic of the lesson content and, for older children, a quote or a poem. You can, if you want, open a brief discussion about the poem or picture or quote. It can help get into a flow state on a what can feel like a clumsy communication tool.

Activity: Always summarise/reflect on what we did last time

The digital world is very "linear". Platforms like Facebook have ever-lengthening timelines of content – what people type and share. This activity helps to build a meaningful narrative over various lessons. It simply makes use of the importance of reflection and summary and can reduce anxiety online.

You can even do this as a quiz, start a sentence for others to finish, or simple guide reflection as an act of memory. "So, who remembers the last thing we did at last week's online lesson? And what did we do before that? Or you could just offer a verbal summary or screen share a picture, a diagram. Keep pictures simple, otherwise you will notice some children staring, transfixed, "Captured by the screen". But, from session to session, build a sense of continuity and help children harvest their learning.

Suggestion: Not too close to the screen

Model the right position to be in relation to a computer screen (or a smartphone or tablet). Put some distance between you and the screen. Get

closer to the reality of a physical classroom. Ideally children should be able to see your head and shoulders, not just your face (we learn with our entire bodies in the classroom, we are not disembodied heads!). Gesture with your hands, sit back so your head and shoulders, and even hands, can be seen. (You might need a good microphone – a portable Bluetooth speaker with built in microphones is ideal for this). Even get up and move about, show physical things such as books – you can even write on a blackboard or whiteboard! But only showing heads puts us unnecessarily into our intellectual brains.

Suggestion: Always talk to the camera holding the person in mind

Digital tools are a distraction – they are a filter, both a gateway and a barrier to contact with another person or group of people who are not in the same room or physical space as us. It is easy to “forget” the intensity, the subtlety and the uniqueness of a person we see on a screen made of pixels, even when the screen is remarkable clear and detailed.

As Waldorf teachers often already do before a class, bring each child’s image, personality, unique qualities to mind, hold them in memory before starting a digital meeting. When in conversation, bring an inner intention into your consciousness, an intention to recognise that child as a unique person, there on a screen before you, but also sharing your world here on earth, connecting to you across space – the screen is the medium the connection does not truly come through the screen. Meditating on each child gives you an anchor to them when online.

Suggestion: Go slower than normally

Many people tend to speak and act more quickly in the digital world. You only need to see how fast children (and a lot of adults) text these days! Use your intuition to find the right pace for your online class. It is usually better to slow down, to allow things to sink in, the repeat important things in different ways. Initially the children may seem impatient and get distracted. A slower pace is something they often get used to and it is almost a relief to them to have time to think, to digest and to stress less.

Activity: Drink water/all have a glass of water

This is the perfect opportunity to model the importance of drinking water. Ask students to all bring a glass of water to their virtual class. Model by dipping regularly from a big glass of water. It can be fun to drink together! It can become an enjoyable rhythm. There is evidence that we become dehydrated when we don't drink, and even more so in front of very warm computer screens.

Suggestion: Apply the fifteen-minute rule

Whether children know it consciously or not, digital screen time is sensory overload. Younger children can be so affected by it, it disturbs their sleep and powers of concentration. Any lesson should never run for longer than 15 minutes without a break, perhaps 20 for teenagers.

For a 45-minute lesson - 3 x 15 mins with short breaks for water and summarise each 15 min slot. Bit ideally a break should be as long as time on screen. Online, less is more when you are virtually teaching.

Suggestion: Open the session with thanks for attending

The digital world of social media is all shorthand, smiley and often courtesy and kindness can be absent, or reduced to something superficial and empty. Always thank the children for showing up! It might feel awkward, but it underlines the value of their attendance. The appreciation of their existence and also helps them to value their learning properly, whether it is physical or virtual.

Then close the session properly and thank all for attending. You can close with a short summary (with a slide that reinforces your voice), a look ahead to the next session, setting homework (with a follow up email or voice recording). The digital world is a place of chaotic content, often poorly organised. The Waldorf Teacher threads a meaningful and logical way through.

Activity: Tune into a topic by posing questions

The digital world is a place overflowing with “telling”. They are called “status messages”. Yet children of all ages are discovering the world. Posing questions on all forms of digital communication, be it email, social media or a video meeting, awakens curiosity, inquiry and sparks interest in the world. Online a lesson built around a question posed can be a very valuable thing. We need not even fully answer. We might find the question leads to further questions. As Waldorf teachers we should “give answers” even more selectively and consciously in the digital world than we do in the physical world. Waldorf Education is a place of way-finding, curiosity and discovery, even more so online.

And that doesn’t mean constantly Googling. Google is an answer-finding (and very selective at that). We should use search engines sparingly. Bringing a real dictionary to a video conference class can be a lot of fun. We can often ask the children to read aloud from real books online, research in real encyclopaedias, in front of each other, on camera. We can show and teach that both real books and search engines have their place.

Time trials can be fun. You posed a question and everyone looks it up in a real book, on camera. Who can be first? Then we can do this with the children asking questions. Then we can make the time deadline gentler and this can then turn into some shared research, a real spirit of inquiry. All the camera does it let us see each other. The digital technology becomes just a tool for our conscious use.

As a general guide: Pose questions whenever you can, let them even hang in the air. Answer questions with more questions. Encourage the children to ask questions. Let answers become much less often acts that we celebrate as they explode from our curiosity and patient research. While we are researching, we can even turn off the camera and agree to reconvene in ten minutes.

Suggestion: All text on slides to be larger - all slides simple - better to break information down

People often skim read online, Children don’t take it in. They absorb information in a more surface way. Deeper learning is harder to achieve online.

If you are sending emails using say, Ariel Font, use 14pt. It may look too big at first, but it is easier to read and absorb. Emphasise with bold (but choose when to use it carefully. Don’t use it to shout. If you want to be loud use eloquent repetition. Use italics when you want to be more informal.

When using slides, less is more. Don’t use bullet points for everything. Let one beautifully worded sentence replace yet another list. Pictures can help but keep them simple. Break information down into manageable junks but always offer those bits back to the children as a whole picture, an overview, a coming together of the parts.

Activity: Draw student names on paper as if in a circle. Imagine them as a circle

This is an inner activity just for you. It can be easy for our online connections to become abstract and detached. Our names are important in a physical calls. Use them online as much as you would in a class – it can become easy to drop names online and just address children namelessly. If anything, use their first names more.

Take a real piece of paper, and draw the student names either in a list of in a circle. But try to imagine them in a circle. Humanity is a family. We gather around the warm fire in difficult times, sharing. Video conferencing is designed visually to put people in video boxes or a straight line of images. Gently hold the circle of children and yourself) in a place of struggle, of endeavour to see each other, to connect as if joined in a circle. As each children speaks or you speak to them, imagine their place in that circle. You might find emotion arises as the circle is a place of fellowship, fellow feeling. And we need that in challenging times such as the days in which we now live.

Suggestion: Brightness not on full

Screens can be loud, bright and uncomfortably garish. Turn the brightness down. Reduce the “blue light” if possible. You can do a brightness check with the children each time. Brightness check. Volume check. Posture check. Valuing our health and looking after our senses. Being the ones in control of what we see or hear. We can do this lightly. The children can tell you what you look like to them! It’s an easy check-in at the start of an online

Suggestion: Use speakers not headphones

This will not be the same for everybody. A lot of children like the privacy (even feeling of being in a secret space) of headphones. It may also be necessary in some smaller homes, so don’t force this. But where possible, locating our digital technology fully in a room is far better done with a speaker. The sound then inhabits the physical place. We are “online” but much more consciously in the physical world – much closer to our physical classroom experience.

This could be an interesting topic for discussion and debate with older children.

Activity: Window opening time

Not surprisingly, fresh air is as important to your health and wellbeing when you are online as when you are in a physical classroom. Fresh air is breath. The flow of air into a room is a kind of breathing. Sounds from outside remind is there is a real world “Out there”. Birdsong and the wind in leaves are

reminders of nature. All of these things bring us memories of the physical world as we immerse in a digital one. It isn't either-or. It can be both. Going to the window and breathing some fresh air can be something we all do when taking a break in an online class.

Activity: Hold some clay

This can be an activity for the whole class or just the teacher. Earthing ourselves is virtual as we float in our heads in the digital realm. Grasping some clay is grounding, it brings us to earth. As a rhythm in each class it can be fun, we can even make something with a 5-minute time deadline, or even it can be something we make over time. For the teacher, just grasp it a few times, letting all of your hand (not just fingertips) sink into it whenever you feel the need to get out of your head or simply rebalance.

Suggestion: Take a walk in the garden and digital gardening

After digital activity, try to go for a walk-in nature – your garden if you have one, or the local park if you are able/allowed to (you may be self-isolating). Even checking your window box, watering plants is beneficial. Nature is of course, the powerful and important restorer.

It might be possible to get the children to give everyone a virtual tour of their garden or show their house plants with a mobile device.

You can even share photos of something you are growing and compare its growth and development over time

Suggestion: Breaks between online sessions

Between lessons online, take proper breaks. The timetable for online teaching needs time for recovery, digestion of content, and "coming down" from screen time. Encourage parents to set rules that, between lessons in a school day – just as at school normally, there should be no gaming or cartoon watching. You can set physical tasks and activities, though rest is better. Digital time takes its toll on children. It is mostly head time – having a run in the garden will suit some children, for others it is quiet time. Don't be too dogmatic about this – this is a stressful time for us all and some children need to be allowed to calm and relaxed in whatever way benefits them most. Parental support is key here and we, as teachers must dialogue with, but also trust them to make judgements in their own homes.

Suggestion: Hold love inside, pour it out, notice intolerance

You may notice if you ever look at the comments sections in newspapers where the public dialogue with each other about a news story, how quickly

that chat becomes cold and intolerant. Cyber-bullying has become a major issue for all schools and for society at large. The coldness and unacceptable behaviour may show itself online, especially during these difficult times. Teachers need to be very aware of this, be trained in all the correct procedures and must be ready to support each other if this arises. Professional response is as important as at any other time. But stress in some children can take this form and we need to be ready for it.

Online, a teacher who demonstrates kindness, sensitivity and a willingness to transcend the digital medium and its limitations, to recognise, acknowledge and connect with the uniqueness and value for each children, as well as the class as a whole, will be trusted and often become the first point of contact from a child experiencing bullying or intolerance. Online we need to be seen to listen specifically, to be open to a child's questions, silence. It can be harder to read online, Regular conversations with parents, fellow teachers, other colleagues – all of these need to form part of a deep and warm, ongoing concern for a child attempting to learn via the digital world. There's in no space for a teacher to be cold, teasing, intolerant and, worst of all, indifferent when engaging pedagogically with children via a virtual medium.

Note your intolerances, irritations, annoyances. Take time to reflect. Slow down. Look for the best in yourself, your colleagues, and in the children and their families. Be warm in a realm that is often too quick to judge and too cold in the realm of thinking and feeling.

Activity: Introduce verbal and adverbial language

Being eloquent in what you say and type can be a wonderfully empowering and enlivening tool in the digital realm. This is a realm of nouns – of messages, emails, keyboards and screens. Of course, there are verbs as well, but it is easy to resolve a feeling into a smiley. This can be a slot of fun – the art of shortening, simplifying, doing things immediately and replying with one word. But language is moving in us all of the time. Verbs and adverbs have lively, changing qualities. They can offset a digital world that can become very fixed, superficial and simplistic. So, add some verbs. Make it more poetic, inject some movement and life into online lessons. Poetry, but also the way you speak. Are you "setting your homework for tomorrow" or are you "now going to be guiding you through a challenging but hopefully rewarding opportunity to practice imagining and then writing your own exciting story". Some language enlivens. Often in the digital realm, it re-enlivens and re-awakens.

Activity: Hold an inner gesture of communicating across physical space not through the screen

Imagining a person across physical space, across geographic distance, affirms we are in one place, they are in another. It can be easy to imagine that our connect to another human being when we are online is through the screen.

The classroom is a physical place and now, in the situation where we are studying from home, separated physically from each other, we look to connect through the screen. Somehow, resolved into screen dots (pixels) and ones and zeros (the binary language of programming) the person is recreated for us, in front of us. Rudolf Steiner warned people about this illusion. A human being can never be deconstructed into ones and zeros he said. He was very wary of the effect of technology in a mechanistic, repetitive way on our creativity and spontaneity. Yet he also celebrated the achievements of a science that produced such miracles as a telephone and the radio (during his time).

As a Waldorf teacher, when looking at children through a screen, listening to them on a conference call or a phone, or emailing them, (and if this feels intuitively right for you), hold this in mind: I connect with this child (or these children) by means of this brilliant technology, but I connect *to* and *with* them across physical space.

You may find this creates a necessary separation in awareness between what you see on a screen and the connection across physical space with the child. This simply reinforces what we do normally in our non-digital lives. You miss your grandma in Australia. You rarely then feel the loss of connection coming from a screen. You reach out with your heart and mind across the distance.

Suggestion: Offer middle ways to polarised, binary thinking and language

As mentioned earlier, the digital world is a binary medium. It tends to wards either-or when people communicate – not always but often. It requires effort to share nuance and subtlety online. Adverts change on and off every few seconds. When we press “enter”, there is no halfway between the action being performed or not. Binary is convenient for the digital world.

We want to teach our children that life is a place of infinite possibility, and it is not either-or. So, if you notice polarised thinking, offer a middle way, seek alternatives and ask questions that take us away from either-or. Debate, discussion, creative thinking. Always have “But have you also considered” ready to be deployed!

Activity: 100% punctuality

Be a good timekeeper and expect it from the children, Start on time, Finish on time. The digital world of social media, gaming and watching TV can be a place of instant gratification, of “just one more episode” or “just five more minutes”. There is a place for that. But here we are offering some sturdy and reliable education. The children are not physically at school. The world is in change and much can no longer be depended on. Be that rock, that safe harbour or learning online; As a teacher, keep all of your promises, no white lies, gentle, firm, kind assuredness.

Suggestion: Stay anchored to the physical world

As a Waldorf teacher online stay anchored to the physical classroom, now temporarily lost to you. Continue with a main lesson blackboard if you can. Draw and write on real paper. Paint and sculpt. Build and bake. The gesture is for you to be at your best for yourself in order to be at your best for the children and the rest of humanity. Rest properly. Eat well, drink water. Make real intuitive physical notes with a real pen or pencil on real paper, even as you look at a screen. When on a video call, still take physical notes. Stay connected to physical tools. Use your whole hand and not just fingertips on keyboard or phone glass.

Activity: Inner mantra: I am grateful for this tool. But I am not this tool

This is a simple verse, the subject for a short meditation. The teacher and the tool are not the same thing! The digital world offers the chance to connect with, and educate children when they cannot come to their school and classroom. It is, of course, not the same. But it gives us this possibility, this gift. But we must learn to hold our own. Here's an inner verse to be said privately aloud, or quietly inside: "I am grateful for this tool. But I am not this tool". Make up your own.

Suggestion: Use soft shade colours in slide design

If you are using slides for a PowerPoint (Or similar program) presentation, use colour as you would in a physical classroom. Colours on bright screens can be too loud and garish. So, experiment as you design and soften the colours. Use softer shades, but not too faded or unclear. They will look different on different screens, but don't default to black on white unless that's appropriate for a particular theme or topic.

Activity: Create away from screen activities then meet at the screen afterwards

You can set tasks for the children that they can then email back to you (with parental help if needed) or you can take a break from screen and then students can come back having researched something, written drawn, painted, or made something. With mum or dad's help we could make something in the kitchen (be safe) – this must all fit safely within the home environment, agreed in advance with parents. The main point is we can set tasks for children to do, away from the screen and then report back on progress. Engaging the will involves activity, ideally away from the screen.

Suggestion: Avoid a cold, monotonous voice

Voices tend towards monotony online. It can happen to even the most animated drama teacher online! Be aware of your voice. Do a voice warm up before an online session. Read emails or texts aloud before you send them. Be theatrical. Put some life into your voice! You might even find you then edit what you type and end up sending something better, if it is an email.

Online, pedagogical stories and anything we say that has moral force or content needs to contain rhythm and repetition. Because the digital world can be such a shorthand, intellectual place with less space for feeling, which is often resolved and shortened to a "kewl" or a smiley, deeper, moral concepts can be lost in the speed and the noise.

Use emphasis in your voice and repeat moral ideas three times. This is often the case in stories anyway. But when we are teaching ethical and moral things, we may have to speak louder and more often to be heard.

Activity: Meditation on the physical child

Hold in mind and memory the physicality of each child. Remember back to when you last saw them at school. Their build, their eyes, their posture, the way they stood, walked, their gestures, any subtle ways they moved, responded, their voice, their hair colour. Don't worry if you don't have a good memory of them.

When you next see them (if that happens at all) online, on a video call for example, compare your memory to how they look now. Don't criticise yourself for any mistakes. Just notice and gently correct the picture. Hold those first memories for as long as you can – that physical memory. Each time you see them in the digital world. Hold the new image presented live, digitally and that original one. Hold both, as one in your memory. Both are this child, this unique soul. Your blessing to teach them as they grown towards freedom.

Suggestion: Use a Bluetooth speaker with a microphone

Lessons should never be "all head". Don't sit too close to the screen. Sit back so you can gesture with your hands. You can even stand up, draw on a board with a Bluetooth speaker that means you can speak at a distance from the computer and also you can hear questions from the children. A Bluetooth speaker (you can buy one for as little as £10 and a good smartphone may also do the same job well) means you can teach in the whole room and not just at a desk. In a smaller class the children can do this too.

Activity: The Importance of Pedagogical stories, indeed ALL stories in the virtual classroom

Stories transfer and transpose well in the digital classroom. They are a bedrock of Waldorf Education. Get the children to read them (Ideally not on screen but they may already be listening to audio books). Tell them stories, talk about them, draw them, retell them. Have a story round: Something interesting that happened since the last class. Involve parents. They can guest on lessons and tell stories – true and fiction. Stories they were told as children. Tell stories from the world situation as it unfolds – inspiring, sad good news, stirring, lessons learned, adventures, realisations, and so on.

Stories may well carry the Waldorf Child and Teacher through these difficult time.

And finally, ...

We cannot know if we take Waldorf Education online, even if only for a few weeks if it will do more harm than good. The inner gesture of the teachers, the College, the parents and even the hunger of the children to learn, these have immeasurable value.

It is a gesture to maintain connection with our pupils and students, to continue the shared story – one of waking up in the world, finding out who we are and being the we can be in the world. If you choose to do this, you make use of a technology that has changed our times beyond imagination. It creates addiction but also connection. It gives us access to life-saving information but also fake news. It is both a gateway and an illusion.

If we use it consciously, perhaps the online Waldorf classroom may do some real good. Only time will tell. I wish you well.

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