Making remote learning work

As the fight against coronavirus continues, remote learning is here to stay and must now be adapted and embraced as part of our range of teaching and learning approaches...

No school expected to be plunged quickly into remote learning, with teachers and students separated from their peers and working from home. The learning curve has been steep - and it is on-going.

On the plus side, thanks to increased amounts of ed-tech and devices in schools, many teachers and students have been able to remain connected and learn within a version of their in-school classes. We have seen how important this can be over an extended time in terms of maintaining a routine, trying to minimise learning gaps and even simply continuing the habit of learning when all other routines fell away.

Remote learning is not a natural or ideal scenario for either students or teachers. But with the pandemic rumbling on and on, it is one many will need to adapt to and embrace.

We are perhaps a bit late to the party, but blended and remote learning will likely be part of the education landscape across the world from here on in.

What is different about remote learning?

Unlike a class environment where students can get support from each other and check things with their class mates, remote learning means that they suddenly need to become more self-reliant and proactive with their online questions to the teacher if they need clarification.

This is a huge change and one that risks the students simply "tuning out" if they do not understand. So lessons need to take this into account, as well as considerations such as screen exhaustion (RCPCH, 2019), the fact that not every student has a computer and many instead be accessing lessons via a small phone screen, reduced concentration and a lack of supervision (especially needed to help younger pupils remain focused).

Teaching comes first

Although the technology needed to make remote learning happen is important, the teaching still comes first.

According to a research paper by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2020; *SecEd*, 2020), the thinking behind the structure of the lesson is the key: "Ensuring the elements of effective teaching are present - for example clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback - is more important than how or when they are provided."

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Schools can help create more space for their teachers to focus on this more intricate mode of lesson planning and delivery by adopting straightforward, dedicated remote learning solutions that are easy to use, rather than complicated technology that could be a source of stress or distraction.

Visible and reachable

A sense of connection is important for students' continued motivation and engagement, and technology provides teachers with a variety of ways to do this remotely. If their technology allows them to run "live" lessons by broadcasting their webcam and audio out to students, that is a great start.

But visibility can be more than just via webcam or video - the teacher can reinforce their connection to students by giving audio feedback, for example, or by using stickers or bitmoji and so on.

It is also beneficial for students to have the chance to initiate contact with their teachers, so it may be that they can make themselves available in a "break-out room" on a set day and time, where students can drop in and interact.

Build independent learning skills

The increased tech-driven environment is actually a great opportunity to help students gain the independent skills they will need for remote learning, now and in the future. Teachers can model the use of calendars, schedulers and reminders so students know when a specific learning activity (e.g. "live" interactive session) is coming up or when assignments are due. They can also encourage the use of messaging and chat features to ask questions and share ideas - as well as teach the metacognitive strategies needed for resilience and perseverance, helping students to help themselves if they get stuck.

Peer-to-peer

Making provision for students to interact with their peers is vital. With nobody at their side to ask things like "what did Mr Smith say we had to do for question 3?", creating an opportunity for students to communicate not only provides that support, but means they can connect with their friends and class mates for a while, albeit virtually.

Providing chances for peer interaction for activities such as discussions, collaboration, sharing and giving feedback can also go some way to sustaining engagement, especially when students are physically distanced.

Stay safe, protect students

We must all practise good digital citizenship. Age-appropriate internet controls, filtering and context-based keyword monitoring are all devices used within schools to keep students safe online. And with the right technology in place on school devices, most of those protections should be able to continue as students use them at home.

However, it is the teaching behind the concept of being online that enables students to develop good digital citizenship skills for themselves. Regularly reinforcing e-safety messages reminds them of the implications of their online interactions, as it is easy to feel

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protected from everything when separated from friends and peers while in isolation or lockdown at home (see *Kingsley*, 2020).

The digital divide

A major contributor to exacerbating the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in the lack of access to technology - and it is an issue that schools do not have the capacity to solve alone. Simply providing school devices to students will no bridge the gap if families cannot afford broadband, so it is here that remote learning needs to diversify to help ensure students are not left behind.

Whether it is spreading the word about where those with school devices can go to access free internet connectivity (libraries, community centres etc) or pre-loading content onto devices to enable students to continue to learn offline, or providing paper-based learning resources, planning and delivering lessons is a much more significant task than in "normal" times.

ℹ FURTHER INFORMATION

▶ EEF: *Best evidence on supporting students to learn remotely,* April 2020: https://bit.ly/3autoH1

▶ Kingsley: *Creating safe digital ecosystems learning, SecEd,* August 2020: https://bit.ly/31IMYOD

▶ RCPCH: *The health impacts of screen time,* January 2019: https://bit.ly/3kZKanG

▶ SecEd: *Research review outlines five keys to effective remote learning,* April 2020: https://bit.ly/2VtRPA7

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