OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW?

Paul Beavis

Paul Beavis, Education & Product Specialist from SCOMIS, discusses how schools can adapt, explore and harness some of the system improvements achieved through the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of new technologies in education and altered the assumption by some that schools will always be slow to change.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many schools were merely using technology to distribute resources and allow students to submit work for assessment. At that point, the prospect of delivering live (synchronous) learning whilst supporting students' learning asynchronously seemed daunting. However, the need for online learning has forced schools to re-evaluate the ways in which they work.

Many took advantage of Department for Education (DfE) funding to commission a learning platform such as Microsoft 365 or Google Workspace to a set of baseline

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configuration standards. This provided a minimum set of cloud tools to deliver distance learning via a web browser in an engaging and manageable way.

Certainly, the combination of delivering both on-site and remote learning has been challenging. Many discovered that the trick to this hybrid learning was to exploit the digital tools to the best effect – without causing huge increases in workload – and those willing to embrace transformation discovered that former barriers to change were not as onerous as originally perceived.

Modern learning platforms have been specifically designed to be collaborative and intuitive to use, making them less 'clunky' than the virtual learning environments of old. Creative use of digital classroom tools allows resources to be created, adapted, repurposed, and shared in a matter of seconds, making it relatively effortless for teachers to distribute work electronically, give meaningful feedback, and monitor students' progress.

Automated workflow and notification processes minimise administration, allowing teachers to be in control of their classes and students to be on top of their studies. Furthermore, pre-created internet resources can be quickly incorporated into virtual lessons, reducing duplication of work and reimbursing teachers with precious time.

Many have realised it's still possible to foster teamwork between students and staff while operating in a hybrid environment. As staff have become more familiar with the technology, virtual live-streamed lessons have evolved to include a higher level of interaction with greater social communication. In some cases, lessons that previously worked well face to face had to be adapted to keep students engaged within the virtual environment because, unlike a physical classroom, it's far easier for students to disengage, be distracted, or fail to comprehend topics unnoticed. Splitting content into bite-size chunks with polls and quizzes incorporated into them checks understanding and ensures learning is taking place.

The creative use of shared documents, portfolios, virtual classboards, and chat tools has enabled students and teachers to interact despite being isolated from one another. Many educators have been surprised to discover that when sufficient levels of interaction were incorporated into virtual lessons, remote learning could be just as personal, engaging, and socially connected as learning in a traditional classroom.

The way forward

Not only do learning platforms manage and deliver lessons remotely, they also help schools communicate and collaborate in new and different ways, allowing them to focus on high-quality teaching, targeted academic support, personalised learning, and student wellbeing. Consequently, many schools are now considering to what extent they wish to revert to their pre-COVID-19 operating practices.

New ways of communicating include virtual assemblies, virtual parents' evenings, virtual staff rooms, and virtual (staff supervised) playgrounds. Facilitating virtual events (and allowing staff to work from home whenever possible) has improved parental engagement as well as work-life balance. However, not all households have access to an internet-enabled device, so, in future, some schools are considering allowing stakeholders to use devices on school premises to participate in online events.

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The pandemic has definitely widened the disadvantage gap. Strategies such as further embedding of learning platforms with after-school blended and flipped[1] learning, where remote and digital platforms support face-to-face classroom teaching, are going to be vital in spanning the attainment divide in years to come.

Making a broader range of digital tools and resources accessible will greatly assist students with independent and supported learning, and exploitation of artificial intelligence and data analysis tools in learning platforms will allow for quick diagnostic assessment and instant automated feedback, further assisting in bridging the gap. Continued engagement from parents (albeit at a lower level) with their child's learning will also be vital in supporting students to catch up.

For many, COVID-19 has given the impetus to adopt, roll out and exploit the functionality of education technology tools and digital learning platforms. Post COVID-19, it's likely that blended and flipped models of teaching will continue to contribute to minimising teacher workload whilst improving student outcomes. ■

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1 While often defined simplistically as schoolwork done at home and homework done at school, flipped learning is an approach that allows teachers to implement a methodology, or various methodologies, in their classroom.