

Effective Online Learning Strategies

The Covid 19 outbreak has forced educators to adapt their teaching and learning strategies rapidly in response to the new teaching dynamic they now face. At first it may seem almost impossible to continue to teach and learn without students in front of you. Thankfully with the aid of modern technologies this doesn't have to be the case. However, it is certainly true that it will be necessary to adapt pedagogical techniques and refine the curriculum if effective practice is to endure. It is likely to be some time before normal classroom practices can be resumed and digital solutions will therefore be needed for some time. It is therefore worth investing some time and effort in improving things over time, learning new skills and when the time is right taking the best of what has been learnt and experienced to make more traditional classroom practice better in the longer term.

There are several key elements that leaders need to have considered when designing a distance learning strategy that is appropriate for the context they find themselves in:

- 1. IT Infrastructure**
- 2. IT Skills of Students and Teachers**
- 3. Safeguarding Pupils and Teachers**
- 4. Pedagogical approaches to Distance Learning**
- 5. Continuing to Motivate Learners**
- 6. Meeting the needs of SEND students**
- 7. Ensuring the Mental and Physical Well-Being of Learners**

IT Infrastructure

It is critical to create an IT infrastructure which works effectively for the context within which the school operates. In some schools all staff and students have access to digital devices whilst others may still have been relying on individual PCs in classrooms and IT suites. Some schools already made use of Virtual Learning Environments and/or Learning Management Systems whilst others did not. The large tech companies are currently working with the government to provide schools with the option to develop an infrastructure based around Google or Microsoft for Education. It would be wise for schools to take up this opportunity even if it seems like a big change because the time they save educators are enormous not to mention the huge increase in the effectiveness and variety of pedagogical practice they open up.

Some students may not have access to a laptop or computer at home but most are likely to have access to at least a smart phone. Both Google and Microsoft products are designed to work on laptops, PCs, tablets and phones so learning could take place on any of these devices. The government is offering some help with laptop provision to some students and some schools might consider helping families without a digital connection to find an IT solution.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** we can provide training and support in the use of Microsoft or Google in Education products. We can do this via webinars or provide bespoke recorded training materials for your school. We can provide training materials for both students and teachers. Even if you do not want to go down one of these routes we can review and suggest ways in which schools might use IT solutions to communicate and teach more effectively. We can also advise and assist with procurement of digital devices and provide advice on the best Learning Management System for you. We have also been successfully using a Virtual Learning Environment for many years and can provide advice and support on choosing a system for you and how to effectively set it up quickly and with minimum need for training of staff or students.

IT Skills of Teachers and Students

In every educational establishment there are teachers and students with varying levels of IT skills. Different departments and individuals like to use different ICT tools in different ways. Some will have a multitude of techniques at their disposal whilst some will have a more limited skill set. Undoubtedly as we started with distance learning the best advice was to go with what you knew but as time goes by and people become more confident about the techniques they are using they become more willing to experiment and try new things.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** with over 10 years of using IT platforms to enhance teaching and learning we have accumulated a wealth of knowledge on resources, techniques and software that benefits different curriculum subjects. We can provide advice to schools, departments or individuals on the different IT resources out there for different subjects. We can also provide webinars and training materials to help teachers make the most of the systems they should be using and in certain situations we may even be able to help create bespoke curriculum content to ensure teaching and learning are as effective and dynamic as they can be in the current circumstances.

Safeguarding Pupils and Teachers

One concern that is often raised over the use of technology for digital learning is the increased potential for a safeguarding concern to be generated. However, if the right policies and protocols are put in place there is no reason why most IT applications cannot be used professionally by staff and students.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** we have a lot of experience in looking at the potential safeguarding issues that can be caused by distance learning. We can help advise on what these are and help to ensure robust policies and usage agreements are put in place to make sure the digital learning space stays safe. We also have access to highly experienced computer technicians who can advise on ensuring your IT infrastructure is set up as you want.

Pedagogical Approaches to Distance Learning

All schools will have learnt a great deal about what does and does not work effectively in their context during the current crisis. Lesson craft will need to have been adapted. Teachers and students will be dealing with a variety of home circumstances. Some may be able to teach via video conferencing. Others may find that this is something they cannot do so easily. How can schools ensure content can be accessed by students who cannot access a lesson at a set time? There are a variety of ways in which effective distance learning can be delivered. What works in one school will not necessarily work so well in another context, so it is important to ensure a bespoke approach where possible. It is also critically important that assessment strategies are developed that allow teachers to see if students are engaging with their learning and whether there are gaps emerging in their understanding. There are a variety of techniques that can allow teachers to collect this kind of information in a timely fashion.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** that works within an educational trust we have a good understanding of the different challenges and contexts schools are working in. We can work with schools on a bespoke basis to gain a better understanding of the school before advising on pedagogical approaches tailored to their needs. Other schools might already have a good understanding of what works for them but would like to ensure there is an effective pedagogical approach across the school. We have the capacity to create recorded training materials or webinars to meet your CPD needs and offer advice and guidance on the characteristics and components of an effective distance learning lesson.

Motivating Learners (and teachers!)

Variety is the spice of life they say, and distance learning is no different. With the right tools at your disposal it is possible to create a tremendous variety of different learning opportunities that keep things fresh and students keen to continue their learning. Digital learning tools can also provide what many young people will be yearning for at the moment and that is a safe communication space where they can interact with their classmates and their teacher. Google Hangouts and Microsoft Teams both offer great potential for the creation of the kinds of social spaces that exist in traditional classrooms. Cloud based solutions offer amazing opportunities to create collaborative and engaging learning experiences that, when done well, can radically reduce the amount of lost learning time.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** we were using these tools well before the shift to distance learning occurred. We can provide training and advice to schools and teachers on how to create varied distance learning opportunities. Where the need arises, we can also offer bespoke advice to staff in different subject areas on how to create continually engaging learning experiences. This is all done with the knowledge that teachers' time is finite and our strategies are based around saving teachers time and not adding to their workloads.

Meeting the needs of SEND students

One of the greatest concerns amongst educators at the present time is how to best meet the needs of SEND students when they are away from the classroom. Thankfully, there are a lot of tools built into software that can help SEND pupils to progress even when they are being taught remotely.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** we have used technology to overcome barriers to learning with many students and have a wealth of experience in the use of assistive tools that can help individuals. We can provide training materials to help train staff in how to make the most of these to ensure that all students can access the learning that is being provided so we continue to meet the needs of everyone.

Ensuring the Mental and Physical Well-Being of School Communities

These are stressful times and many students will be finding distance learning a lonely and stressful experience. It has been amazing to see the extraordinary things that schools have been doing to try and keep spirits high within their school communities and look after everyone's well-being. Schools have also been busy developing systems to try and ensure that they ensure they maintain their duty to look after the young people in their care.

As an **EdTech Demonstrator School** we have been using technology for many years to help us to look after the physical and mental needs of our staff and students. Tech, used well, has the potential to help staff with their workloads and remain organised, decreasing stress levels. Disseminating information and the systems needed to do this effectively so that school's reach as many students as possible with their approaches to well-being are really important and we can support schools in ensuring that they are making the most of the work students and staff have been doing to look after their school communities.