

## **Learning from Lockdown: how to develop blended learning**

*William Pope and Andy Markwick provide a case study description of how one school tackled the challenge of remote teaching during the pandemic. They argue that what was learnt from this experience should be embedded in continuing blended practice and they provide a comprehensive professional development guide*

### **Exploring one school's lived experience**

This article reflects upon the journey one school made during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly related to the development of remote teaching. It explores the leadership and change-strategies applied during this challenging period and argues that much of what was learned should be integrated with 'normal' teaching and learning to provide an enriched and versatile blended learning strategy for the future.

The article presents the structural arrangements it made as a key element in its response to the challenges created by the lockdown restrictions and makes recommendations for future integration of what has been learned.

To understand the school's approach a study was carried out which explored participant perceptions and how they were informed by personal and lived experiences. Information was collected using interviews and focus group. Ethical approval was gained through the host institution. Throughout the study BERA ethics guidelines were adhered to<sup>i</sup>.

The experience of teaching remotely throughout numerous lockdowns has, while challenging at the time, ultimately worked in the school's favour, which now has an upskilled staff body who remain highly competent in synchronous and asynchronous digital teaching. In this article, we will share the experiences learnt from this case study and use it to propose a template for a blended learning approach to education in future.

The evidence from the study provides a strong argument for schools to capitalise on the benefits of digital teaching and utilise these going forward by adopting a blended learning approach to their future curriculum and associated pedagogies.

### **Training at the Outset of the Pandemic – Background to the Case Study**

With hindsight it can be argued that an institution's capacity to cope with the almost immediate transformation from 'normal' teaching to COVID-induced remote teaching, depended heavily on the IT infrastructure, professional capital, and the culture that a school had in place before the pandemic arrived. Certainly, a response to the first unprecedented COVID lockdown in March 2020 was not able to draw on any detailed and lengthy planning processes. So, response to this first lockdown was clearly a test of that school's adaptability and resilience. This is now no-longer the case, with schools having plans in place to facilitate remote teaching at short notice, as well as the knowledge to access a number of digital resources.

A Head of Digital Learning (HDL) had been appointed three years previous to the pandemic, and as part of an ongoing strategy to provide all Yr 9-11 pupils with access to iPads, the HDL had begun to train staff with the support of a dedicated team of Department Digital Leaders (DDLs) who

specialised in subject specific skills. With lockdown imminent, training efforts increased significantly, but in many respects, this was an intensification of current procedures, rather than building a completely new system from scratch.

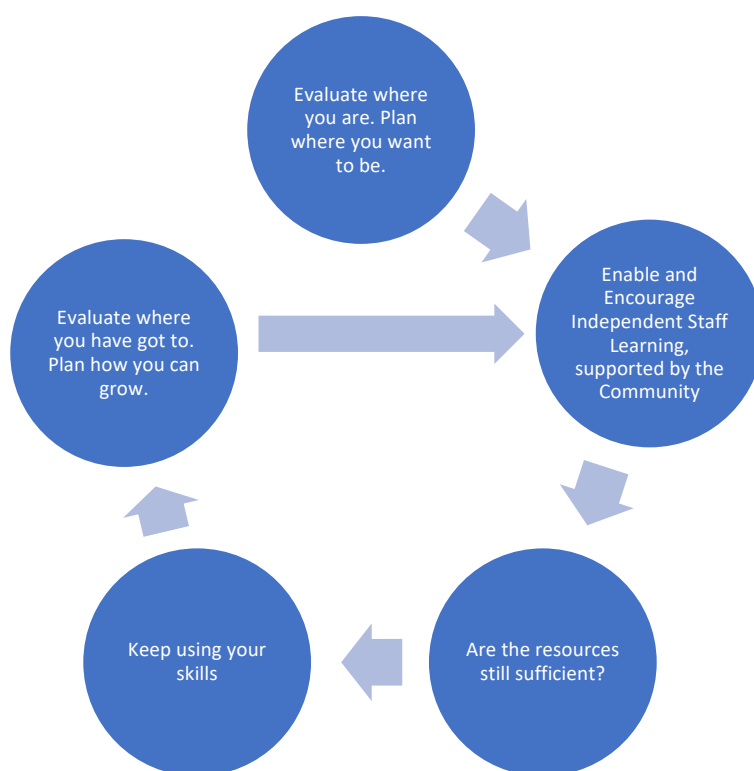
Despite the significant challenges that individual staff, students and parents faced, many new opportunities were revealed and made available to students and our weekly update to parents was awash with student experiences. Many of the experiences had not been offered pre-Covid.

Enrichment through these opportunities included:

- Lower 6th Physicists remotely completed a Particle Physics course at University of York, 225 miles away, over the Christmas holidays
- the highly coveted Oxford University Rutherford Laboratory open day which previously only hosted 7 guests at a time in person was able to host hundreds of schools online with enormous success
- the History Department virtually competed in a competition at Sheffield University,
- Drama students filmed a Coronavirus Time Capsule, still available online, and
- several departments reported pupils remotely attending lectures by Nobel Prize winners that were being held hundreds of miles away.

### **Digital Teaching Moving Forward**

There are two key ideas on the adoption of new practices by teachers. Conventional wisdom suggests that staff attitudes and beliefs about new practices will undergo initial change, resulting in changed practice. <sup>ii</sup>However, Guskey suggests that a change in staff attitudes only comes as a result of improved student outcomes, following the change in staff practice. <sup>iii</sup> The manner in which the change to remote teaching was forced upon staff implies that our situation was halfway between these two Teachers' engagement in learning new digital skills seemed to polarise into 2 key groups. Firstly, those early supporters of digital teaching who were already in a mindset geared to easily adapt to remote teaching, in keeping with the experiences suggested by Bubb and Early. <sup>iv</sup> Secondly, we identified those (self-described) less confident colleagues found themselves, becoming more enthusiastic about the whole concept of digital teaching as they saw it working as recognised by Guskey. <sup>v</sup> Their progress was evidenced by the increased involvement and enthusiasm in the remote teaching process from these staff as the lockdowns progressed.



Throughout the process of preparing for, and then conducting, lockdown teaching, HDL conducted numerous surveys to gauge staff confidence and ability. These were conducted both during and after each phase of lockdown and formed the core of their research for an Action Research Cycle which they used to create, develop, and adapt a school Digital learning Strategy and accompanying policy. This was influenced by contact with colleagues at both partner schools and nationwide who were able to influence a collaborative development of ideas.

From analysing the HDL's early research and the feedback provided by colleagues for this study (which focused on their perceptions of the professional development they received to conduct remote teaching), we suggest a process which schools may wish to consider to both maintain and progress teacher use of digital resources. They are:

- Evaluate where you are. Plan where you want to be
- Enable and Encourage Independent Staff Learning, supported by the Community.
- Consider whether resources remain sufficient
- Keep using skills
- Evaluate progress to date. Plan future growth.

### **A guide to developing confidence and skill in remote teaching**

Drawing what we learnt through the evaluation of our case study experience we offer the following guidance to schools and practitioners:

#### **1. Evaluate where you are. Plan where you want to be**

##### **a. Current Ability**

**Staff.** Without an accurate view of where your staff's ability lies, you cannot design and adapt your Professional Learning (PL) programme. Develop an audit for all current staff (and repeat for new staff arriving at the school at a later date) to get an

accurate view of the bespoke training programmes needed for individuals to become conversant with the school's digital processes. Similarly, create a five-minute aptitude check-in for all staff to do every term to self-assess their abilities (Skilled/need a refresher/ ready to develop further) in all the techniques and processes available. Our HDL emailed out their version as an online survey during every INSET day and tended to achieve 80% response by the end of the day. Make it absolutely clear on the survey, and elsewhere, what skills are bare minimum requirements and what are simply desirable. Staff about to undertake development should be able to expect 'hands-on' PL that is relevantly focused on their individual practice. Not only should it equip them in using digital learning platforms and teaching remotely, it should also provide creative ways to blend these newfound skills with traditional teaching and face to face learning experiences.

**Students.** Earley and Porritt propose that when evaluating PL it is crucial that we have an accurate idea of the baseline ability of students.<sup>vi</sup> We suggest that in the case of digital teaching this covers both the academic and digital ability of the pupils. We believe the term 'digital natives' is a misleading one.<sup>vii</sup> It refers to people who have grown up in the internet age, are presumed comfortable with using technology and suggests a high degree of IT competence. However, while a Yr7 student may be a superb Minecraft player, it doesn't mean they can manage the digital filing system needed to store all their schoolwork or spellcheck a document. We need to understand how much training pupils need in this field and consider how this training will fit into the curriculum. Further, it is important to consider what do we want them to be able to do by the end of the proposed training cycle? "Being clear about exactly what pupil progress you expect as a result of staff development activities is half the battle."<sup>viii</sup>

b. **How will you evaluate success?**

**Planning backwards.** Having coined his "Five Critical Levels of Professional Development Evaluation" (see box, Guskey 2000), Guskey later suggests that this framework can be used in reverse to plan or "planned backward", providing a framework around which to plan the PL. Hence, when planning PL, the first consideration should be the required Student learning outcomes (Level 5), working up through the list to the final consideration, Participants' reactions to the training (Level 1). This method has evolved at the hands of Bubb and Earley<sup>ix</sup> ) into a twelve stage process, adding the importance of an accurate knowledge of current position before Guskey's process begins and suggesting further dissemination of the training (to other adults and pupils in both this school and external schools) at the end of the process. Whichever framework is chosen, the process needs careful planning from the outset.

**Evaluating success.** Many of those writing about professional development make the point that it has to be at the outset of the professional development programme that you establish how you will evaluate the success of your development training. "With evaluation factored into your planning at an early stage you are able to align all feedback gathered throughout the process to contribute towards the final conclusion on whether the training was a success or not. It should be noted that this evaluation conducted by those planning and conducting the PL should run concurrently with, and be supported by a self-evaluation framework conducted by all staff in their termly aptitude check-in (see above).

**Five Critical Levels of Professional Development Evaluation: (Guskey, 2000, p.79)**

1. Participants' reactions
2. Participants' learning
3. Organisational support and change
4. Participants' use of new knowledge and skills
5. Student learning outcomes.

2. **Enable and Encourage Independent Staff Learning, supported by the Community.** Ensure systems are in place to give staff the opportunity to develop independently, whenever they want to.<sup>xi</sup> Aim to make this a non-threatening environment whilst still encouraging ambitious goals for individuals. A staff member should have the tools made available to them to undertake their own professional learning when they choose to do so. Further, the environment should engender the confidence in staff to experiment and take risks with digital approached in the classroom without fear of failure. Provision to develop this can include:
- a. **Curated YouTube channel.** The internet is an intimidating space. Make a school channel with links to videos that you endorse and that are relevant to your school's IT systems and that support more creative and improved teaching and learning. You don't need to have made them all yourself, but you need to know that a teacher watching them will be able to learn from it. Our school's digital teaching and learning channel is purely functional but has 89 subscribers from across the school community (teachers, pupils and parents) and one video "Enabling Microsoft Teams to work on iPad" has over 19000 views.
  - b. **Cultivate a Specific Digital Teacher Learning Community (TLC).** Create a system online where staff can ask questions about remote teaching techniques, and others, **anyone**, is encouraged to respond, not just HDL and their staff. A tailor-made MS Teams page was created for staff which every teacher was automatically added to – it was buzzing with people sharing ideas, asking for ideas, and giving help. This is very similar to those 'in person' TLCs suggested by Newman<sup>xii</sup>, but with the added benefit of all staff being able to contribute as much as they feel the need to do so.
  - c. **Keep Training in House.** Have your trusted and respected Digital Leaders conduct all the generic staff PL. It buys them credibility, is cheaper, and is tailored to your needs.<sup>xiii</sup> If your digital leaders need specific, external, training to do their job that is unavoidable, but try to keep all whole staff training in house.
  - d. **DDL and buddy system.** Encourage and incentivise DDLs to take the lead in their department. Enable them to find teaching methods, apps and techniques that work specifically for their subject. Invite any staff needing extra support and training to ask for a buddy, someone well skilled who can mentor and guide them through what they may consider to be an intimidating training programme.
  - e. **Recognise training.** Appreciate the time and effort that staff are contributing to their development in this field. Acknowledge it in their annual appraisal and performance management plan and praise those who have made significant gains.

- 3. Consider whether resources remain sufficient** This is a new dimension of the school's activity and needs staffing and resourcing correctly, with a detailed policy stipulating responsibilities and requirements based on audits of resources and evaluations of skills as described in (1). Highly desirable resources at this stage would include:
- a. An enthusiastic and respected head of the digital section (HDL).
  - b. Motivated staff supporting them in each faculty (DDLs) and bank of willing mentors.
  - c. Allocated time for PL for all staff following results of audit and evaluation.
  - d. Extra time/staffing and financial resources in the IT department. Schools may also need to consider the provision of devices for pupils unable to afford their own.

Introducing any combination of these will be a positive move towards creating a blended learning culture.

- 4. Keep using skills.** Present opportunities in the curriculum for these skills to be developed and maintained. Whatever processes are available in your school to continue using remote teaching, do so. These may include:
- a. If pupils are absent, encourage them to join the lesson remotely through video call. If staff are absent, ask them to dial in for part of the lesson, instead of just setting passive cover work.
  - b. Get students doing practical work in the class to use their camera to talk an absent child through their process. Not only does the absent pupil remain involved in the lesson, the act of verbalising their work may greatly increase understanding and engagement for the student presenting their work.
  - c. Occasionally set self-marking assignments on Seneca or Socrative for homework.
  - d. Once a month get pupils to submit homework electronically through the school's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and provide good feedback through the same system, encouraging pupils to view it as an asset to their learning.

All these activities keep digital learning in the forefront of both staff and pupils' minds and maintains its credibility as a viable option if needed. Many of them, once the initial task of establishing the system is in place, can be significant time savers for staff.

**5. Evaluate progress to date. Plan future growth.**

**a. Evaluation.** Bubb and Guskey<sup>xiv</sup> have similar ideas on the importance of evaluation. It is needed before starting PL, immediately on completion of the training, and then a period of time (perhaps a term, perhaps a year) later to see how the training has changed actual practice. Encouraging staff to self and peer-evaluate their progress can allow them to feel trusted and respected. While oversight of this self-evaluation may fall to Heads of Academic departments to monitor fine details specific to their staff, HDL needs to have a very clear idea of how they are evaluating the attitudes of staff to the training they have received at those three points on the timeline suggested by Guskey. There is nothing to prevent, however, this evaluation from being ongoing, independent and linked to the annual performance management cycle. Both Bubb's and Guskey's evaluation frameworks are useful at this point, having incorporated the strategy into your planning from the start. King's 2014 framework is a highly in-depth evolution of these systems, but with 39 different categories of consideration, may be considered too detailed for what is essentially a subsection of the school's ongoing PL.

**b. Planning.** Once a staff development plan has completed one circuit you may find that, if maintained, you are a school able to pre-empt and react to any future need to practice remotely. Aspire to keep a high level of remote teaching for pupils stuck at home through

illness or moving abroad for family reasons. It is an additional strength to any school which provides it with a huge degree of adaptability. Two key points to consider when thinking of next steps:

**Acknowledge Staff Individuality.** Either way, at this point acknowledge the different levels of skills amongst your staff and consider the best ways for individuals to develop in keeping with your overarching intent.

**Avoid Change for Change's Sake.** Decide on a list of tools/techniques/apps that the school uses and stick to them (while acknowledge specialist apps for subjects). Pupils hate having to download a new file, get a new account, try a new 'exciting' app (application) for every single lesson they have. Much like the physical classroom, there are plenty of advantages and enthusiasm amongst students for a topic specific internet resource but producing something new for every single lesson is exhausting, for teachers and pupils alike. Choose crucial, good, systems that work well, stick with them, and outline them in policy. We have heard a horror story of one respected independent school deciding to switch from Google classroom to MS Teams over the weekend, with staff and pupils learning of the change on Monday morning. This is almost a guaranteed way to lose learning resources, students work and significant lesson time. A change of this magnitude should only be considered as a last resort.

### **Blended learning –more inclusive, flexible, and engaging**

The terrible experiences that schools faced through the pandemic cannot be underestimated, whether this is in terms of lost learning or through the, too often, heart-breaking effects on friends and family. However, once again we see the undeniable strength and determination of colleagues working collaboratively towards presenting their students with alternative learning opportunities. Many new skills were learnt during these challenging times and applied in providing effective learning experiences for children. So, it seems obvious that we should, as suggested by teachers in this study, capitalise upon these new skills to drive forward the creation of a new engaging, reflective and inclusive curriculum. By creating opportunities for blended learning, we argue that teaching and learning will become more inclusive, flexible, and engaging. Overall, the effectiveness of learning will improve. The steps suggested here may not be a sure-fire way to ensure a school becomes a shining beacon in digital learning, but by sharing the ideas we used during, and have developed since, COVID, we hope they may spark some thought on what your school wants to achieve in this new, confusing area of education.

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