

Reflections on Remote Learning

Matthew Faulkner, headmaster at Parsons Green Prep, London, reflects on setting up his school for remote learning during the coronavirus lockdown

I don't think I am the only head who wished he was 20 years younger when lockdown was announced. The sudden need to create a virtual school from scratch called for instant mastery of more than a few IT platforms. Names which now seem so familiar – Seesaw, Microsoft Teams, Firefly and the ubiquitous Zoom – were pretty much the preserve of the young and the tech-heads back in March, but I had just three or four days to get on top of them and roll out the virtual school to our expectant parents, a fair number of whom soon self-identified as IT consultants and heads of large tech companies – no pressure.



Matthew Faulkner, headmaster at Parsons Green Prep



Enter the young. The majority of our teachers are under 30 and for them the challenge was no challenge at all. While I scratched my head and wished I had studied computer science rather than Spanish literature, they stepped in with practical and considered suggestions. Use Teams as the organisational framework, get a pro Zoom account (you can keep your meeting running all day) and there you have it. Children log in to Teams in the morning to read any messages and to find the Zoom link for the day. Teachers join and leave

the Zoom meeting according to the timetable: lessons are delivered live and work is uploaded to Teams the minute it is done. The overriding mantra came from one of our excellent parents – head of one of the aforesaid tech firms – whose advice was 'KISS', to keep it simple, stupid.

That is exactly what we did. At the time of writing, parents and children are really enjoying the new system and tech savviness is higher than ever all round. Teacher satisfaction is also high. They can address their whole class or just an individual, while sharing their screen and using the whiteboard. If ever the pupils seem in need of a boost they are adept in suggesting a stimulating change to routines: bring a pet, pyjama day or come dressed as your parents are a surefire way of bringing a flagging class back to life.



Is there a downside? Well, lots of parents are on the sidelines in Zoom lessons, not least to help their children navigate the tech and the WiFi (and many are excellent at printing out worksheets). This is all fine, but knowing that your every word, opinion and facial gesture is being broadcast to mothers, fathers and helpers across the globe does tend to keep the teacher on their toes even more than usual.

The flipside of this is that teachers get occasional glimpses into the home lives of their pupils. Loose mute buttons and misdirected cameras reveal visitors arriving, dogs barking, dishwashers clanking and the occasional full and frank exchange between siblings and/or parents. All fascinating to witness.

My only worry – when I teach – is that my pupils might share the behavioural traits of my own children. I have three currently doing remote learning. Admittedly, they are above prep school age, but they do not make it easy for their teachers. With the mute button on, they have been known to flick onto YouTube, message their friends, make breakfast or even have a shower – leaving the teacher to address an empty chair. I am sure this never happens at Parsons Green Prep, but the very thought of it makes me sweat. Thank goodness the parents are there to keep order.

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