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Special Issue



The Transition from Face-to-Face to Virtual Teaching: The Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges, as well as the opportunities, faced by the education sector in its endeavour to adapt to virtual methods of teaching and learning in response to COVID-19. While significant advances have been enacted in order to provide education during the pandemic, there remain significant efforts to be made to ensure that the future of our youngest generation is not hindered.

Key Words

Children; Young Adults; Social Media; Influencers; Exploitation; Manipulation

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges for people across the world, from all walks of life. It has caused disruption beyond that of anything we have previously encountered in the modern world. Governments have borrowed extortionate amounts of money; businesses have had to close their doors; public services have been brought to their knees (King, 2020; Butler, 2020; Davis & Campbell, 2020). It was essential for restrictions to be brought in to slow the spread of this sometimes-deadly virus, but these produced an instant need for adaptation to the challenges they presented.

The education sector has faced its share of challenges provoked by the pandemic, but it cannot simply close its doors or postpone teaching. The long-term impact of children missing out on education cannot be underestimated, so the sector has had to adapt to this unprecedented event and continue to provide education in order to secure a viable future for today's children and young adults. Schools are social hubs in which young children talk, shout and sing, sending aerosols into their air in spaces which if not well ventilated well

will increase the chance of the virus being spread. Whilst it is known that good ventilation can help to reduce the spread it may not always be possible for school classrooms to provide this (Zafra & Salas, 2020). Because of this, the way the education system has operated since its beginning had to change.

How did the education sector initially respond to this immense challenge?

With students and teachers confined to their homes, remote learning was the only way forward. Pupils and teachers alike had to develop and become familiar with new ways of learning, ways that had never been trialled before in most settings and needed to be put in place within a short time frame. The challenges were many:

- How can teachers deliver new curriculum content to children?
- What activities can children undertake with greater independence from their teachers?
- How do teachers ensure lesson content is engaging and interesting for pupils?
- How can we ensure that all children have equal access to learning?
- How can teachers establish that learning has been understood and that concepts

have been mastered?

In the early days of widespread school closures, the initial response from many settings that did not have electronic capabilities in place was to send paper based 'learning packs' home with pupils. This meant that all pupils, whether they had suitable electronic devices at home or not, had access to activities with which they could immediately engage. The preparation of these is time consuming: they may need to be differentiated for students working at different levels, and the students need to be able to access and complete the tasks independently. The latter issue presented particular problems for children in Early Years and Key Stage 1, who are reliant on adult support to undertake learning activities. The biggest barrier using this method was that no new learning could be presented in this way. The packs were based on learning with which the children had previously been presented and were designed to consolidate that. This meant that these could only ever be considered a stop-gap until systems could be put into place to allow teachers to provide meaningful learning inputs for all children.

With the initial response becoming redundant, new methods had to be implemented.

In most cases, the second phase of delivering remote learning involved online input. The Oak Academy was set up with government backing to provide online lessons for children in the primary and secondary sectors (Williamson, 2020), and teachers worked together to make the most of using online tools such as YouTube to record short learning inputs. This took remote learning to another level; students were able to see their teachers and could access new learning before being set exercises in which to practice their newly acquired skills. This still had limitations: there is evidence that one of the most significant factors in progressing children's learning is effective feedback from teachers (Hattie, 1999). Pupils practicing their skills in their own homes took away the teachers' ability to provide high quality feedback, address misconceptions, and ensure that pupils are on-track. Some of the greatest learning opportunities in the classroom come from discussions between pupils and teachers, pupils asking questions and

sharing their views and perspectives on different subjects, and teachers asking carefully considered questions to move forward pupils' thinking (Weimer, 2011; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). None of this was possible using a video lesson model of learning, so it soon became clear that an alternative was needed.

How was online learning developed further?

To replicate the classroom environment as closely as possible, live online lessons soon became the way forward. Fortunately, we live in times where live lessons became easily possible for most settings in a short time frame. Tools such as Microsoft's Teams and Google's G-Suite, among a range of alternatives, became the subject of education blogs, with schools and universities making rapid decisions about which system would work best for them (Gibbons, 2020). It might be argued that these systems had it all, perhaps paving the way for the traditional classroom set-up to become a thing of the past. Through these systems pupils can see their teachers, hold conversations and discussions (albeit not as smoothly as in person), be set tasks, talk with their teacher online if they come across challenges with a task, and submit their work for teacher feedback. However, whilst this system works most effectively, some limitations remain. A school's curriculum, in its widest terms, includes everything a pupil experiences during his or her time at school. Extracurricular provision forms an important part of this, and it is impossible to secure children's improvements in, for example, gymnastic skills without watching their performances first-hand.

What else did educational establishments have to consider?

While schools did all they could to provide for students, there were, and still are, issues beyond their control, such as financial and environment factors. This raises the question of how to provide education online to those who are unable to access it. With help from the government's devices for schools scheme (Department for Education, 2020), schools were able to provide devices to those who needed them, but providing internet access is much more difficult. In this situation, the most

successful learning will take place in stable households where parents are able to ensure that pupils stick to a routine, have a quiet space to work, and are supported to give their best. This means, unfortunately, that some pupils gain more from this method of learning than others, depending on their home circumstances, the value parents place on education, and the ability of parents to support their child at home. Engagement with parents is a crucial aspect of ensuring success; many families reported to school staff that they went to great lengths to balance their own working-from-home to support their children's learning but, of course, this presented challenges for many families already struggling with worries about health, finances, or the myriad other problems that the pandemic presented.

Of course, our educational establishments are about so much more than teaching curriculum content to our children and young people. For too many children, schools provide a safe haven where they are free from harm or abuse, where they are provided with a nutritious hot meal, and where they are supported. This provided another challenge for schools in ensuring, as far as possible, that children in need were suitably catered for. Throughout the pandemic, children of critical workers and vulnerable children were offered places within the school setting (Williamson, 2020). This was ideal in terms of providing a safe and secure place for these pupils, but it presented challenges: it was difficult for children across different year groups and taking different subjects to access online lessons from the same classroom; and school staff needed to supervise the learning of these children which meant they were unavailable to provide online learning for their usual pupils. There is much more to consider than how we enable pupils to learn.

How did the challenges differ for Higher Education?

Many universities already had electronic capabilities in place. Systems such as Blackboard, Canvas and Panopto are used across many higher education settings, allowing students to turn in work online, see their lecture notes, retrieve their assignments, and watch lectures that have been recorded. These were widely used before the start of the

pandemic, allowing for an easier transition to online learning from the usual in-person lectures for many students. Although online teaching resources were used before the pandemic they were tested when universities needed to close. Universities had used online resources to supplement in person teaching before but now they were using online platforms to provide all teaching. This was of course challenging for tutors who had to find new ways to deliver entire university courses and students who had to adapt to this new way of learning through an essentially experimental teaching method. Of course, in-person lectures will always offer more engagement and more of a social aspect for both teachers and students.

What impact has the lack of in-person teaching had on students' mental health?

One cannot ignore the effect that the drastic move away from in-person teaching has had on young people's mental health. It is incredibly important for a child's or a young person's development that he or she is placed in a social setting, one that schools and universities provide. Although peers and teachers can communicate over virtual platforms, it is no substitute; humans need in-person contact. It is not healthy for someone to be confined to their home and feel socially isolated (Tamm, 2019). Schools and universities provide a purpose. They provide routines which are essential for one's mental health. Without the structure in-person teaching provides, a person is likely to stray from his or her routines. It becomes challenging to keep on top of the sheer volume of content in the curriculum without a dedicated place to complete the work. Although students may feel they have more time and flexibility with online teaching, the restrictions mean that learning is now done in the same space as a person sleeps, eats and spends much of his or her time. The lack of varying environments to separate these activities, combined with orders from the Government to stay at home, no doubt have a drastic impact on one's mental wellbeing.

The opportunities to come from the virtual teaching

There are many challenges with virtual teaching, and it is fair to say we currently do not have the perfect recipe for providing all

teaching through a virtual means. However, this is not to say that there are not also opportunities. The generations currently learning within the education sector have been brought up with technology at the forefront of their lives. Where these young people can access it, they are using technology in all aspects of their life, so it makes sense that education should be the same. Many students will find it easier to study online for several reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of pressure from peers when learning online, which is what often prevents pupils from answering questions or presenting their work. However, this problem could still arise in the online classroom. Online teaching, for many, can be much more convenient and lifestyle friendly. This is especially true for the older generation of students, who often need to juggle education with part-time work. Pre-recorded lectures and online content can be accessed anytime, which is perfect for those with difficult schedules. Of course, when needing to contact a teacher or deliberate ideas, speaking in person will always be easier, but schedules very rarely align and, even when there is a gap where two people could meet, time is taken away with the need to commute, get ready, and prepare or find meals. The ability to send an email with a question or to request a video call and receive a reply almost instantly allows students and educators to maximise their productivity and therefore learn much more.

The education sector has had to adapt to incredible challenges presented to it this year. Educational practitioners have had to find innovative ways to continue teaching and to maintain current standards, and they have worked incredibly hard doing so. It is without a doubt that there are many opportunities to come from virtual teaching, but there are several challenges, with more emerging as each day passes. As the new year approaches, there is still much work to be done. Life will continue to change as the pandemic continues, and we are yet to see what the coming year has in store. It is essential that we address the current issues and work forward to provide

the best possible education for our youngest generation. This pandemic will pass and, when it does, a lack of education should not be a contributing factor for the problems that our youngest generation will face throughout their lives.

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