



# E-learning – a burden or an opportunity?

**Tom Dodd** reflects on a tough year for schools, but offers great hope for those who embrace e-learning and are agile enough to act on the business opportunities that arise from it.

▲ Remote learning offers schools a new revenue stream, leaning on their international reputation for high teaching standards to recruit pupils for additional tuition

**The challenges facing the education sector are widely publicised. The pandemic has had a far-reaching effect on the global economy and almost every industry is feeling the strain. While many businesses have been able to adjust to remote working, in schools the situation is harder. The UK Government has tried in vain to keep schools open and operating as close to normal as possible.**

Except things aren't normal. The pandemic has imposed a perfect storm of troubles on independent schools. Family income has been hit by the economic consequences of the pandemic. With millions accepting furlough leave this year, or losing their jobs entirely, some families face the possibility of being unable to afford school fees.

Many schools have stepped in, freezing or even reducing fees in 2020. But this just shifts the financial burden onto the school, which must still bear the costs of maintaining their

old and/or listed buildings. Add to that the TPS increasing financial weight on schools, a government review on business rates and the planned teaching salary rise in 2022, and finances quickly become tricky.

Away from the profit and loss, it's increasingly clear that keeping schools open with social distancing in place is like swimming against the tide. The UK Government published a strategy for schools to reopen safely, including placing pupils in limited bubbles and preventing social mixing, as well as reducing class sizes. Schools face a choice when it comes to implementing bubbles. Smaller bubbles reduce the numbers that must self-isolate after a positive test, but larger bubbles lead to more diversity of thought in the classroom and are likely to be better for mental health. However, despite their best efforts, the most recent lockdown and closure of schools is clear acknowledgement that social distancing in the classroom is a pipe dream.

The challenges of the past 12 months mean that pastoral care plays an even more prominent role. Teaching staff know that despite everything, children were really appreciative of being able to return to school and mix with their friends again in September last year. Returning to their homes will be a crushing blow at a time when many pupils report mental health challenges as a result of isolation.

### Independent schools are leading the way

In the early weeks of this year, we heard from many schools that this is now one of their most challenging times. One school told us that they made tough decisions in March, furloughing all but 10 staff, who then had to adapt to a remote teaching model within days. Another said that the lack of exams made it difficult to keep pupils motivated and led to parents questioning if they were truly getting value for money.

Despite that, there is an overwhelming feeling of pride in the effort that schools have made. None of the independent schools we spoke with reported major coronavirus outbreaks in the autumn term. While all admitted that the new safety measures were difficult to adjust to, they are working.

### Adapting to e-learning

In business, where profits rely on adapting to the market, agility is key. That is why last March business moved quickly to adapt to remote working. Impressively, independent schools followed quickly behind. Many have been praised for their swiftness in moving lessons online. One schoolmaster told me they even received commendation from a government minister about their e-learning programme.

In some schools, e-learning is nothing new. Eton, for instance, mandates that all pupils own an iPad and notes and assignments are completed digitally. Others say that they expect to return to their 'normal' lesson structure once the pandemic is over.

### Leaning on technology

What is it that makes some schools hesitant about expanding their use of technology in the learning experience?

One staff member tells me the 'soft-feedback', usually in the form of facial expressions or body language, which suggests a pupil does not understand the information in front of him, is hidden over video. Since a teacher relies on this feedback to identify struggling pupils early, there is scepticism about the effectiveness of digital learning when lockdown ends and it is no longer mandatory. Furthermore, another experienced teacher tells me that, while laptops are used more widely in lessons, pupils still prefer the ease of pen and paper on their assignments. He says that despite the opportunities for using technology in lessons, staff and pupils gravitate towards printed worksheets and written notes and he doesn't see that changing soon. But the fact is, it is changing. The business landscape now leans on technology more than ever.

The use of laptops in lessons is a marked shift in the learning environment even in the past decade. The workplace of the future will draw on human capital from all over the globe. People will work together across borders using the same tools that make remote learning possible. Each printed worksheet is a digital file that could/should be used interactively.

### Technology is changing expectations

While I'm sure that many teaching staff reading this article will feel their hearts sink at the prospect of e-learning long-term, this is not gloomy news. The overwhelming pattern of the schools interviewed since March 2020 suggests that those that had some form of e-learning in place were the best prepared when lockdown arrived. Many of them tell me that the experience of the past few months has revealed some great benefits – all the teaching staff I spoke to expressed their buoyant approval of online parents' meetings!

Many of the challenges mentioned at the beginning of this article can be tackled using e-learning. One teacher told me that they initiated a virtual learning programme in the summer term that was such a success, they recruited pupils from other schools on a temporary basis. Remote learning offers schools a new revenue stream, leaning on their international reputation for high teaching standards to recruit pupils for additional tuition. It also makes more efficient use of teaching resources, as staff can record lessons for on-demand playback – pupils can re-watch lessons, and lessons can be re-used each year if they are of outstanding quality.

Furthermore, the safeguarding requirements placed upon independent schools are effortless with e-learning. Hybrid learning (a mixture of in-class and remote lessons) makes social distancing a breeze, and platforms are rapidly maturing to make pastoral care far more accessible. Technology already exists that uses machine learning to read facial expressions and report the emotions of the individual with staggering accuracy. Microsoft Reflect,

uses anonymous surveys to allow teachers to track the emotions and motivation levels of pupils to provide additional support where necessary.

The future is uncertain. It is yet to be seen what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be to our lives and how we live. However, it cannot be denied that technology is changing our expectations of how work and education should be carried out. The schools that evolve with the world around them are the schools that will be tomorrow's success stories. As Winston Churchill said: "To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often." ◀

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