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Evaluative comparison between live teaching and The Winston Churchill School's Remote learning model.

There is a view that live lessons are the best response to the challenge of delivering effective remote learning. This document compares the evidence for the delivery of live lessons or an alternative, asynchronous approach.

For the purpose of this comparison "live lessons" are considered as synchronous remote instruction between teacher and students, for example via MS Teams or Zoom.

This model will be compared with the School's asynchronous participation which we combine with teacher feedback via Frog. This involves, input (video, audio or text), followed by an activity or task that is submitted to a teacher and receives verbal or written feedback.

Prior to comparing the different models of remote delivery, it is important to define: learning, the role of the teacher in learning and the teaching and learning approach at The Winston Churchill School.

Principles of learning

Learning is an active process requiring interaction and engagement to make connections between new ideas and prior understanding (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1964; Vygotsky, 1986). In usual circumstances it occurs in complex social environments and is situated in an authentic context. It requires learner motivation as well as sustained cognitive engagement when learning complex ideas. This is due to the considerable mental effort and persistence necessary.

The Winston philosophy is for students to learn through curated discovery and enquiry. The approach is designed to build the skills and resilience required by learners whilst students acquire knowledge and understanding. The teacher's role is to create and facilitate the delivery of learning activities designed to create the optimal circumstances for this to happen. In addition, we aim to instil an implicit expectation that students are more capable of solving their own problems than they may think.

As a school we have applied the same principles in our approach to remote learning. Assignments are designed to require the learner to solve problems through the application of knowledge and skills. Assignments may require learners to: process new information, make connections between new information and what they already know, or assimilate new knowledge into an existing frameworks.

School evidence that this has been effective as a philosophy

As we have developed and embedded this philosophy, we have found students are better at overcoming barriers. An example of this would be the significant reductions in requests for support from students. Enquiries are now rare and come with details of what has been done already alongside what the potential reason for the issue may be. Students have demonstrated the resilience and problem-solving abilities required to overcome technical issues and have found solutions to barriers independently.

Students have also conveyed their appreciation for the wider benefits of this approach. They are able to see how it has improved their organisation, motivation and self-discipline. Furthermore, they report that they can see how this is excellent preparation for life beyond school.

Before comparing the two approaches it is important to note that schools are not expected to deliver live lessons and less than half of state schools are providing "live" lessons.

Synchronous remote instruction

Whilst there are benefits to the model, it is important to note that having investigated how this is deployed at other schools, it often does not match the perception by parents of what it could or should be.

Many schools have disabled video for students and/or teachers. This is due to a number of reasons including:

- lack of technology
- abuse by students
- students being self-conscious and not wanting to share video of themselves or their home
- teachers being concerned that images of them will be modified and shared
- safeguarding students and teachers

Furthermore, chat is often restricted or disabled entirely due to the challenges of enforcing discipline and teachers report that students can be reluctant to contribute/ask questions in this format.

Synchronous instruction can provide a more rigid structure to a day which may be beneficial to the less disciplined students. It can also provide some of the social interaction known to support effective learning and motivation.

Examples of synchronous instruction models at other schools:

1. 5 x Full 1 hour sessions each day – students and teacher are in meeting. Input from the teacher at the start of the lesson. Teacher provides answers at the end and students self-mark. No work is submitted to the teacher. No work is directly marked by the teacher so no specific or personal feedback.
2. 5 x shorter sessions each day – students and teacher in meeting. Input from teacher at start of lesson. Teacher provides activity to be completed. No work is submitted to the teacher. Limited or no feedback and marking.

The synchronous model requires teachers time to be used instructing those students present. Teachers therefore do not have the time to dedicate to planning and creating resources or marking and feeding back to students.

All models for synchronous instruction require all students to have access to a suitable device at specified times of the day.

Considering the models above and the evidence available, even students who have access to the technology do not "learn" any better, than alternative methods. It is arguable that the provision of direct instruction will reduce independence and resilience whilst also lowering the quality and quantity of work due to the lack of student accountability and personal feedback. Whilst it may feel like a better experience, because an "expert" is present, due to the constraints of the technology it is likely to encourage the development of "learned helplessness" in students.

Equality of access

Synchronous instruction is most effective with a desktop or laptop computer that has a webcam with each student requiring their own device at the specified time of delivery.

We know many families do not have a laptop or desktop computer and have multiple siblings at home, limiting access to devices most suitable for synchronous instruction. Without the appropriate device, keeping-up becomes nearly impossible. Recording the live sessions is a solution, however, the ongoing delivery of future live sessions means students are required to catch-up whilst also being expected to maintain attendance at new sessions.

Synchronous instruction cannot accurately replicate an in-school lesson, this brings further implications for students who would receive in class support, or for whom teachers routinely make reasonable adjustments when in school. These adjustments cannot be facilitated through the synchronous model and therefore the significant minority of students affected could become "excluded". They are also likely to be the students most apprehensive about the experience even if they can manage the demands described.

Asynchronous teaching means students can work at their own pace, they can stop, start or revisit materials and can work at a time that suits their own personal circumstances. In addition, they develop the capacity to organise and manage their own time effectively. Students requiring reasonable adjustments have the opportunity for additional support and guidance, either from staff (via telephone or MS Teams) or from within the home. The synchronous model reduces each student's availability for support, as they are in "lessons" throughout the day. The availability of staff to provide the support to students is also diminished.

Low engagement

Schools that are using live lessons have varying degrees of engagement and anecdotally many teachers report the attendance and participation reduces as time goes on. The fact that students often turn their cameras off means the engagement levels as well as the quality and quantity of work being produced is unknown. Teachers report that students are "present" but not actively working or learning. As well as this, the capacity for personalised feedback is significantly reduced. Most models of synchronous instruction do not require the submission of work, due to the demand the live session place on teachers. The result is that even though students are in a lesson there is no evidence that they are being productive with their time.

Engagement with asynchronous assignments has been increasing over time with the developments we have introduced.

Stress and anxiety

Many students and families, particularly those with additional needs or that may be disadvantaged find the prospect of live lessons very stressful. There is a sense of pressure around what your house/clothes/room should be like and how you engage with learning that can be extremely difficult for many to manage.

The introduction of MS Teams meetings resulted in a number of families contacting the school to request not to be included in the offer for these reasons.

Safeguarding/Behaviour management

Many schools delivering live learning have put significant measures in place to safeguard teachers and students. These often detract significantly from the experience. For example, students and teachers may be required or choose to turn their camera off due to band width restrictions, for safeguarding reason or personal preference. This limits the effectiveness of provision, the teacher cannot observe engagement, quality or provide meaningful feedback.

Chat is often disabled or heavily restricted in meetings because it can be abused by students.

A parent or adult is required to attend every 20mins to ensure safeguarding. The calls have to be held in a communal area of the house which can be extremely inconvenient and may not be conducive to the participant learning.

Many of these restrictions mean the experience becomes very false and of less benefit. The result is often that the teacher simply provides direct instruction to a group of students who then complete a task independently. Very few interact with the teacher and many students do not even work on the activities provided.

Frog assignments are now being created with specific instructional video or audio from the class teacher as an introduction to the activities. Feedback from teachers, students and parents is that this has helped significantly with understanding, motivation and engagement.

Screen time

A full timetable of synchronous lessons would require students to sit in front of a screen for the whole day or extended periods of time. The recommendation for synchronous lessons is laptop or desk top computer (preferably with a webcam).

Assignments in Frog can be accessed through a range of devices so there is greater equality of access. Furthermore, because Frog enables students to submit work in multiple formats, it means they can work away from their screen if necessary or preferential.

Feedback

Schools where synchronous lessons are taking place do not require or expect teachers to provide feedback to students. The justification is that the teacher time with the class is a form of feedback. In addition, the teacher's time is occupied with delivering live lessons. This means work from the synchronous sessions is not submitted or marked by a teacher, rather the teacher provides answers towards the end of the session. Students are not held to account for their work or learning. They are only held to account for their presence in the session which is often not verifiable.

Frog feedback capability means students get personalised and potentially verbal feedback from teachers on their work. This has the benefit of reassuring students where they are successful as well as helping them to know how to improve. In addition, Frog feedback has also contributed towards increasing engagement and completion of assignments due to the transparent accountability to teachers and parents for the completion of the work.

Monitoring

Parents/carers can see all the assignments set; the work submitted by their child as well as any feedback. This means that parents/carers are aware of everything their child is doing. This enables constructive conversations in the home and means that parents/carers can support and encourage their child's learning as well as being able to challenge any disengagement directly.

Ongoing resources

Live lessons are not available as an ongoing learning resource. Whilst they can be recorded so a child can catch-up, it cannot be argued that a recording is any better than the asynchronous method. There are further issues around the sharing of a recording with contributions from other students. Not to mention the time required to catch-up.

Frog resources are always accessible via the on-line curriculum so that at any point in the future any child can access and use the resource to support their learning.

Ofsted's view

Friday 11th January Ofsted produced guidance for schools on remote education: "*What's working well in remote education*" Published 11 January 2021.

The document refers to a number of unsubstantiated and unhelpful myths about remote education. The key points in the article were that remote education is not fundamentally different to other forms of teaching/learning, and that live lessons are not the "gold standard" and that other factors such as simplifying activities, keeping content accessible and providing meaningful feedback are more important.

Conclusions

Whilst there are clearly benefits to having live, synchronous lessons, there are compelling reasons not to blindly assume this is the best solution. The Winston Churchill offer has been carefully considered, taking into account the following limitations introduced by live lessons:

- inequality of access – live lessons are predicated on access to a suitable device, while some families have a number of school age children and one device
- inflexibility of the offer – the timing of live lessons is fixed
- true interaction is not as achievable as you might think - cameras off, chat limited, students are reluctant to contribute
- students are present but not accountable for their work
- anxiety of being on a video call for students and families
- opportunity for feedback during live lessons is very limited
- reduction in teacher capacity means feedback is reduced or removed
- teacher time on discipline increases
- recent research analysis has shown that live lessons are not an effective way for children to learn
- students with different SEN needs, including high functioning, are unable to access and maintain engagement in a remote live lesson - concentration span online is shorter
- there is no legacy resource to go back to, when completing work or revising.

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