WE Position Paper I:

Blended learning beyond Covid: The future of online learning

Report created with Whole Education trust leaders participating in Leading a Whole Education in Trusts series

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Executive summary

What are we learning about high-quality remote learning?

Many young people really enjoy online and remote learning. Leaders reported that it has increased engagement for some students.

High-quality online learning should not lower expectations of young people in the digital work - students want to be stimulated and stretched with high-challenge work.

Focusing on a wide curriculum provision - a whole education - matters more than ever in a remote and online context. Resisting pressure to narrow the curriculum or drop creative subjects is well worth it.

Good online learning is a chance for learners to develop vital wider skills like metacognition and agency.

What are the challenges of providing effective remote learning?

There needs to be a strategic direction and clear intent behind our use of technology for best outcomes. Many leaders identify this as a personal challenge.

There needs to be a greater focus on providing high-quality online content - for all subjects. Leaders feel the standard of much of the content out there is still mixed.

Trust leaders were still trying to find the most effective approaches to diagnosing and assessing online/remote learning.

Online learning often makes the great work schools have put into building strong relationships harder to maintain.

What might a future, blended model of education look like?

It should start with a universal commitment to a high-quality, whole education for all, no matter how or where the learning takes place.

New ways of assessing online alongside more traditional formative assessment can help teachers support students more effectively.

Online learning can help schools make more of brilliant teachers and teaching. In doing so, it’s a chance to rethink some structural assumptions and constraints about how education is delivered.

What are trust leaders immediate priorities?

To address persistent issues preventing students accessing digital learning - devices and internet - once and for all.

Invest in research into best practice and pedagogy for online teaching and remote learning.

Encourage teacher-led partnerships with expert bodies to create high-quality, open source content for remote learning.

Background:

Whole Education is a national network of schools and trusts collaborating to providing a high-quality whole education for all their young people.

Leading a Whole Education in Trusts supports leaders across trusts to share and learn from each others practice and explore what leading a whole education across a group of schools looks like.

Leaders in the LAWET group support and inspire each other to take a sustainable, long-term approach to leadership that challenges the short-termism we see in the English education system.

The WE Trust Influence Forums are roundtable events that provide trust leaders with the space and time to collectively influence each other and the system and become a powerful, positive voice for the change they want to see in education.

Context:

Schools and Trusts have adapted brilliantly, during Covid-19 to the complex demands of ensuring continuity of learning through the development of online, remote and blended learning provision.

WE have been inspired by the resilience education has displayed through this crisis - and encouraged by some of these positives that have emerged from such a difficult time.

Our first trust influence forum therefore explore what role should innovations in online and blended learning play in a post-Covid-19 world?

Further info:

Are you curious to find out more? If have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch trust@wholeeducation.org
Schools and Trusts have adapted brilliantly, during Covid-19, to the complex demands of ensuring continuity of learning through the development of Remote/Digital/Blended provision - what role will this offer play in a post-Covid-19 world?

What does high-quality whole education look like in a remote and virtual world, for staff, children and the wider community?

Should Remote/Digital/Blended Learning form an integral part of our education offer into the future? If so how? And what might the benefits and barriers be? Schools of the future: how might an embedded ‘Blended Learning Offer’ change our schools?

Schools and trusts have been grappling with the use of technology (hardware and software) to support learners and their learning for at least two decades. Early versions include The Microsoft Anytime, Anywhere Learning project in the year 2000 through the development of Virtual Learning Platforms at the end of the 2000s.

The success of these strategies has been varied and there has, arguably, been a slow evolution rather than a revolution in the use EdTech.

WE believe that a Whole Education is one that supports learning in the classroom, outside of the classroom and in the virtual world. WE also believe that young people need to be provided with the skills, frameworks and support to enable them to take ownership of their learning.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has created a burning platform for schools and trusts in regard to the provision of learning outside of the classroom, all have risen to the challenge and an EdTech revolution of sorts has taken place. Will the changes that have been necessary throughout the pandemic become an embedded feature of our schools and trusts into the future?
What are trusts’ key learnings about effective, online learning?

1. Many young people really enjoy online learning and it has increased engagement for some students. Schools should focus on making online learning ‘sticky’, engaging and fun.
2. Online learning shouldn’t be an ‘easy option’. Young people want to feel stretched, so schools should provide high-challenge learning for all.
3. Focusing on a wide curriculum provision - a whole education - matters more than ever. Ensuring all young people can continue their favourite subjects, not just core subjects, and supporting their wellbeing and pastoral needs, is vital to keep them engaged online.
4. Good online learning is a chance for learners to develop vital wider skills like metacognition and agency. Low-stakes, self-quizzing to give students a feel for how their learning is going.

“Filling gaps’ has to be next door to a fuller curriculum, solution in the virtual world.”

In detail:

Trust leaders taking part in Leading a Whole Education in Trusts had all seen positive consequences of their greater use of online learning. They all felt that there were some children who had benefited from learning in different settings and schedules. It did mean, however, that online learning had to be engaging and appealing - it was now competing with the PlayStation!

The Trust Influence Forum also highlighted the perception of a tension between ‘fun’ and ‘challenging’ learning. In fact, great online learning should be stretching, not easy - but designed in an engaging, exciting way. This highlighted the importance of considering the pedagogy and sequencing of online teaching (whether live or not) very carefully.

Great online learning maintained a broad, whole education curriculum. Leaders were critical of efforts that narrowed the curriculum because art, dance and vocational subjects were seen as harder to provide remotely. Shireland Collegiate Academy Trust shared how they had used the lockdown as an opportunity to build partnerships with cultural organisations and give students the chance to ‘sample’ creative subjects that they would have never been able to engage with during ‘normal’ school life. They had also extended other aspects of school life that you might expect to be lost during the crisis - with hugely successful ‘virtual school trips’.
What are the key challenges to providing high-quality, online learning?

Summary:

1. **There needs to be a strategic direction and clear intent behind our use of technology** - simply providing a device for every child may be necessary but is not sufficient.
2. **There needs to be a greater focus on providing quality online content - for all subjects.** Leaders stressed that the content is as important as the technology used to access it. Too much is of mixed quality - many creative and vocational subjects have little online content.
3. **Finding effective approaches to simply assessing online and remote learning** to diagnose knowledge, adapt teaching and flex provision is still the key challenge for trust leaders.
4. **Online learning often loses the great work schools have put into building strong relationships.** Relationships aren’t just important for young people’s wellbeing and engagement - they facilitate much face-to-face learning too.

“Commercially available content is not as interesting, appealing or contextualised for our kids as we would like it to be.”

In detail:

The digital divide, and the challenges of getting technology into children’s hands, has been well reported. Participants in the Trust Influence Forum were just as concerned with what children were going to do with the technology. They felt the system sometimes didn’t think about strategically or intentionally enough about what the technology was for.

In particular, Trust Leaders felt that even when the technology was there, the quality of online content was often patchy or poor. Some disadvantaged pupils felt that the content didn’t stretch them enough. There was also a concern that in the well-intentioned push to create more content, we had sometimes focused on the subjects that were easiest to provide online (maths, english) rather than a broad and balanced, whole education.

How to assess remote learning, provide meaningful feedback, and understand where individuals and a cohort were at with their learning was still a challenge. Understanding this better was the key action to make online learning as useful for all young people as face-to-face learning.

Many children had been extremely lonely during the Covid-19 crisis, and didn’t experience much at all during lockdowns. Without the 1-to-1 conversations and relationships that had been developed in school their wellbeing was low and they were less likely to engage with any sort of online learning.
How, if at all, should remote learning (as part of a blended model of education) be part of our approach to providing a whole education beyond Covid?

Trust leaders in the Whole Education network all agreed on one thing - online learning is here to stay, and they want to make more use of it in the future in a blended model. Their key recommendations to help us achieve this future model were:

1. **The school system must reaffirm a universal commitment to a whole education for all young people.**

   Whether the delivery method is online or face-to-face, all young people deserve a whole education that is broad and engaging. This is non-negotiable.

2. **There must be a greater focus on building crucial whole education skills - particularly metacognition and student agency.**

   The growing importance of these skills has been highlighted by the Covid-19 crisis and shift to online learning. Online and offline teaching will benefit from a shared focus on developing them in young people.

3. **Online assessment can be a powerful tool to empower teachers to provide a more personalised curriculum.**

   Online assessment is currently a challenge for schools and trusts - but if we get it right, it holds the promise of empowering teachers with better, formative data for a more personalised curriculum and responsive teaching.

4. **Focus on partnerships across and beyond the sector.**

   As online teaching holds the potential to take education beyond the school gates, it also allows schools to be more ambitious with their partnerships and draw on a much wider range of expertise. Spotlights in the Trust Influence Forum showed how a blended model of learning can bring in international experts, specialist partner organisations, and the wealth of knowledge and resources that exist online.

5. **Online learning gives opportunity to rethink some of the practical ways education has traditionally been delivered.**

   Learning in Harmony and schools in the 5 Dimensions Trust in the WE Network have both had success experimenting with alternatives to the normal classroom model online of 30 students, 1 teacher.

   A ‘lecture’ model can allow far more young people to attend great lessons online, while freeing up teacher capacity to answer questions or create a dialogue about the learning. How many young people could benefit from a great teacher’s best live lessons?

6. **A blended online and face-to-face learning model can help bring education back to its core purpose.**

   “It’s not just about the tech, it’s about confidence building, partnerships and collaboration. Education is a human endeavour, is about socialisation, interactions between children and teachers. It’s about getting back to what education is about, despite all of the pressures to reduce it to a narrow set of things. It is human and much more than outcomes.”
What are the immediate priorities and needs (from peers, the wider system and government) to make progress with this agenda?

1. **Address issues preventing students accessing digital learning - devices and internet - once and for all.**

   The crisis has exposed the difficult circumstances for many students and families. While the Covid crisis is still playing out, the government should support schools and trusts - who know their learners best - to practically identify and resolve issues for the rest of the year and into the longer term.

2. **We need to challenge the system’s language, which in some cases is creating an unhelpfully negative, ‘deficit-model’ frame to re-engaging students after a incredibly challenging period**

   Leaders reflected that framing the challenges after Covid-19 in terms of gaps was unhelpful - it emphasised learning that hadn’t taken place, and framed students’ experiences as a problem to be fixed.

   *Leaders were passionate about supporting all students through learning they had missed, and had practical plans in place to do so, but nonetheless they resisted words like ‘gaps’ and ‘catch up’.*

   The next few years will not be business as usual. Importantly, many students were reporting positive new experiences. Leaders felt education should nurture and build on this.

3. **There should be a greater focus on research into the most effective online pedagogies and strategies so we can develop a shared vision of great online teaching.**

   The sector’s rapid shift to online teaching has been inspiring and impressive, but too much innovation has taken place in silos. A shared understanding of effective online pedagogy, greater research and accessible guidance can empower our brilliant teachers and leaders.

   *This conversation will be more powerful the most voices it involves - taking place across schools, trusts, localities or eventually the whole system.*

4. **There needs to be a shared mission across the system to create high-quality, open source content for remote learning - encouraging partnerships between teachers, experts, publishers and other organisations.**

   Content creation should be elevated as a system-wide priority. Just as much as access to technology, it is a moral issue and we all have a part to play in solving it. Teacher participation in content design should be privileged so it better matches their needs and classroom practice.

5. **Leaders need space and time to collaborate and learn from peers on how to effectively integrate technology so it supports their priorities.**

   Even amongst this incredibly difficult time, a once-in-a-lifetime crisis, it is vital we support our trust teams, who are true system leaders, to think strategically and plan for the longer term.

   *One leader described needing space to develop “a school improvement strategy powered by technology, not the other way round.”*

   Leading a Whole Education in Trusts aims to do this through regular spaces for collaboration and ideas-sharing. Leaders agreed more opportunities like this are crucial.