

Review of Emergency Remote Teaching at Ramsey Grammar School during the Covid-19 Pandemic March-June 2020.

Context

On Monday 23rd March Ramsey Grammar school, along with all other schools on the island, was closed in the face of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The Leadership Team had to very quickly scramble arrangements for the creation of an emergency hub for the children of key workers, as well as to set up a system of emergency remote teaching to deliver education to the expected 95%+ of students who would need it.

Our response to providing online learning during this emergency was built on the understanding that the abrupt migration to online learning would create disruption to students', staff's, and parents' lives, outside their association with the school. We decided to take an asynchronous approach to the setting of work for students online to allow them and their families to adjust to the brutally abrupt change in circumstances, giving them autonomy over the completion of work around family lives during the lockdown. Our emergency remote teaching by definition did not evolve from a long term process which might characterise a strategically planned online learning programme, but was a quickly devised response which prioritised the need for students to maintain links with the school to ensure some continuity in learning, but crucially to ensure that relationship links were maintained between teachers and pastoral staff and students and their families to provide advice and support during these extraordinary circumstances. Our response continued to evolve dynamically as we reacted to feedback and tried to improve the quality and consistency of our provision within a challenging virtual context, where communication was limited to online interaction.

In evaluating our emergency remote teaching we cannot compare our response qualitatively with strategically planned online learning. The fact was that we were all operating within the context of a health emergency. There is a danger now of falling into the trap of trying to impose normal measures of progress in teaching and learning on an essentially abnormal set of circumstances. For this reason the absolutely correct decision was made by exam boards not to rely on any work completed during the trauma of lockdown for any exam assessment purposes.

The threat of COVID-19 has presented some unique challenges for us all. All parties involved—students, teachers and parents—have been asked to do extraordinary things regarding course delivery and learning that have not been seen on this scale in the lifetimes of anyone currently involved.

Although this situation was stressful, now that it is hopefully behind us we have an opportunity to review how well we were able to implement Emergency Remote Teaching to maintain continuity of instruction and pastoral support. As previously stated, it is important to avoid the temptation to equate Emergency Remote Teaching with online learning during this review. With a full understanding of the context, we can now evaluate our efforts, and highlight strengths and identify weaknesses to be better prepared for any future need to implement Emergency Remote Teaching.

Review of RGS Emergency Remote provision

During the week beginning 15th June feedback was sought from a number of stakeholders with regards to our Emergency Remote Teaching provision. These include:

- Students
- Parents/carers
- Teachers and support staff
- Leadership group members

The feedback from all parties forms the basis of the following review of our provision in response to a number of key questions.

Given the need to shift to remote instruction, what internal and external resources were necessary in supporting this transition? What aspects of the context (institutional, social, governmental) affected the feasibility and effectiveness of the transition?

When we commenced lockdown we had access to two main online tools- Google and itslearning. It is clear from feedback from teachers that google classroom was the mainstay of online learning provision, and that clearly we would have struggled to provide any consistent amount of online learning to students without it. Some staff used itslearning, which at the time of lock down had a number of passionate advocates amongst the teaching staff in the school, but was by no means a universally used platform that we could rely on for the consistent delivery of learning opportunities. The use of Google and itslearning was supported by DESC's support booklet issued on the Wednesday of the last week before schools closed.

The most consistent feedback from all stakeholders questions why we did not systematically use a videoconferencing tool (Teams, Zoom) to provide face to face interaction during lessons to

supplement learning provision offered through google, itslearning and a number of useful apps used by subject teams, particular to their own subjects.

From my point of view as Headteacher this is the single biggest weakness in our provision, an issue that we must address as we plan for the unwished for scenario of ever needing to fall back on Emergency Remote provision again.

The issues surrounding this were as follows:

- When schools closed not many of us teachers had even heard of the videoconferencing tools MS Teams and Zoom
- Consequently there had been no opportunity to train teachers to use either of these programmes or any others, other than remotely
- Teachers liked Zoom and found it easy to get up to speed with. Consequently many of them used it with classes at the start of the pandemic
- Highly publicised issues with Zoom in the midst of lock down meant that we were asked to stop using it until we had obtained the necessary consent from parents. We are still now trying to obtain the consent of all parents to use Zoom
- We had to follow a similar path of permissions with Teams, until the DESC waived the need to obtain consent given the need to provide education through this specific programme during the pandemic
- Teachers generally found Teams difficult to use, probably because they had not been trained in its use, and many of them preferred to used Zoom
- Later on during the lockdown issues were raised on the GDPR front with google, which caused much concern. The removal of google as an online learning tool would undermine our capacity to deliver online education, since feedback from teachers clearly demonstrated their reliance on it
- As Headteacher I found the quest to source suitable videoconferencing programmes, and the general GDPR issues surrounding their use to be hugely frustrating and time consuming. There seemed to be no clear lines of central support from either DESC or GTS on this, and I felt myself to be very much alone in trying to action these programmes to enhance our online provision whilst ticking the necessary GDPR boxes. In connection with emergency remote learning this is the area where I most needed the help and support of the Department in facilitating solutions which would have made it possible for me to roll out virtual “face to face” teaching across the board in our online provision.

- At no point was I asked to provide details of our emergency remote teaching to the DESC for monitoring purposes.
- Notwithstanding that one of DESC's officers, Andrew Shipley, did his very best to help answer the individual questions of Headteachers about GDPR and data protection issues, and provided some support in a situation in which many of us felt to be "cast adrift"
- The lack of access to face to face teaching opportunities during lockdown is the most consistent criticism levelled against us by parents/carers

After the challenges of videoconferencing teachers identified the lack of student engagement as their next area of concern. We conducted two whole school remote learning attendance "trawls", which revealed an improvement in uptake between the first and second "trawl". We feel this was largely due to active follow up phone calls by our learning support team, but also down to the students being aware of the fact that we were actively monitoring their virtual attendance.

Remote learning attendance trawl 1: 78.9% of students completed at least Maths or English work set or both

Remote learning attendance trawl 2: 81.8% of students completed at least Maths or English work set or both

(Other data is available on request from these two trawls)

Access to IT hardware at home could have been behind many of the issues here. Access to broadband and preferably a lap top computer or at least an iPad with a keyboard are felt to be the minimum requirements for students to successfully access online learning at home. Our response to this area during lockdown was as follows:

- A survey was conducted before the school closed to ascertain student access to IT hardware. This survey was conducted again part way through this period when our monitoring processes revealed that a number of students were not engaging with online learning
- In response to this teachers were asked to complete registers and a team of learning support assistants was directed to phone students who were continuing not to engage. Learning support staff also tried to ascertain the detail regarding student access to IT hardware
- Post-lockdown we have refined the questions that we need to ask to ascertain the true picture on home access to IT hardware and broadband. A new survey is being conducted at the current time

How did the school interact with parents during the pandemic?

The school website was the main point of contact with parents/carers. Regular updates and letters to students and parents from the Headteacher were posted in the website. Important update letters were also emailed home where we had contact details, with a hard copy posted to parents/carers for whom we had no email address. One or two parents fed back that communication was poor in the period of lockdown, though it is unclear whether or not they were aware that the school website was being used for this purpose. It is clear that considerable work needs to be undertaken with parents to clarify home school communication channels in general not only to ensure the communication of important messages during a health emergency. We will also need to renew our request for support with a parent app which we have already researched and sourced, which was approved for use by DESC. Our quest to introduce this stalled earlier this year following concerns raised by GTS.

Parents of vulnerable children felt supported by the regular weekly contact from the SS and S team and the pastoral staff. Heads of Year and members of the SEN team undertook regular phone calls home, and kept in regular touch with the students in their care via the pastoral page on google. Feedback confirms the need to work with parents to train them in the use of online learning tools, in order for them to be able to access and review work set by teachers, but also so that they can be aware of the use of this online learning tool as a means of communication eg through the use of the pastoral pages on google classroom. Teachers reported that they felt that many parents did not know where to look to find the work that had been set, and that this led some parents to being unnecessarily critical of teachers and accepting of some students' explanations for not engaging in online learning work at home.

Was the technology infrastructure sufficient to handle the needs of Emergency Remote Teaching?

We continue to have concerns about the delivery of a "blended learning" model from school from the IT infrastructure point of view. When teachers returned to school w/b 15 June they delivered online learning from their classrooms, and reported that the network was slow and unresponsive faced with the surge in access requirement within school. The issue of home IT access and digital disadvantage is a matter for government, since it is clear that students are limited in what they can access and do by the quality of the device they are able to access (if any) and by the availability or not of broadband at home. As previously mentioned, we are currently conducting a survey to ascertain the true and current picture with regards to home access to IT for our students.

Was our ongoing professional development sufficient to enable Emergency Remote Teaching? How can we enhance opportunities for immediate and flexible learning demands related to alternative approaches to instruction and learning?

The need for continuing professional development in the area of online learning is clear and unequivocal. Feedback from all stakeholders indicates that everyone would benefit from training in the use of online learning tools, and on the development and support of autonomous learning.

Where did teachers, students, support personnel, and administrators struggle the most with ERT? How can we adapt our processes to respond to such operational challenges in the future?

Aside from the issue of access to videoconferencing tools cited above, the biggest issue here was in reaching students who failed to engage with online learning. A more structured, clearly communicated approach to the delivery of emergency remote provision which promotes routine and requires daily registration will be developed to address this. The regular phone call follow up by pastoral and support staff was a positive development, and helped reduce the number of students not engaging, as well as serving to raise the awareness of parents to this issue.

What were the programmatic outcomes of the Emergency Remote Teaching initiative? How can challenges related to these outcomes be addressed in support of the students and subject teams impacted by these issues?

Since the aim of Emergency Remote Learning was necessarily to respond at short notice to a crisis which disrupted traditional means of educational delivery, the means to closely monitor the actual quality of online learning were not prioritised. We did conduct a survey with the students, 255 of whom responded. This gave us some indication of the type of work set:



The amount of course content covered and the consistency of coverage will need to be audited fully by subject teams, however, when the students return to full time education from w/b 22nd June. Consideration of the impact of the lockdown on subject content coverage will need to be given by teachers and exam boards when reviewing internal and external assessment and examination requirements for the next year at least. It was clear from student feedback, however, that care needs to be taken with the approach taken to learning when they return, since many of them expressed anxiety about being placed under pressure to “catch up” on learning “missed”.

In conclusion

Hopefully the COVID-19 threat will soon be a memory. When it is, we should not simply return to our teaching and learning practices prior to the virus, forgetting about Emergency Remote Teaching. There likely will be future public health and safety concerns and also weather events which may cause us to fall back on our plans for emergency remote learning. The possible need for Emergency Remote Teaching must become part of a teacher’s skill set, as well as professional development programming for all school staff.

At RGS our priority recommendations from this review are as follows:

- Establish a structured timetabled approach to the delivery of emergency remote learning with registration and attendance follow up protocols
- Streamline online learning tools and request the support and training necessary for everyone to use and access them
- Investigate the possibility of moving to a VLE (KWC successfully used Firefly) rather than a learning platform to overcome the limitations of itslearning and provide a realistic alternative to google
- Recommend a redefinition of DESC approach to include central support for and facilitation of emergency remote provision and online learning across all the schools on the island
- Establish and address the extent of digital disadvantage amongst our students
- Work with parents to further improve the channels of communication
- Re-initiate our request to adopt, install and roll out a “Parent App” to improve home-school communication
- Adjust schemes of work to pick up students’ learning from wherever it is on their return to school

- Lobby exam boards to ensure special consideration for students in exam groups, especially in years 10 and 12
- Lobby exam boards also to get them to consider pushing back next year's exams till later in the summer term 2021 to allow for more preparation time
- Ensure that staff focus with returning students is on "picking up" rather than "catching up" on learning.

Acknowledgements

Thank you

- To our caretaking and cleaning staff, under the leadership of site manager Kevin Butler. Quite simply our school could not have opened without their hard work and dedication, making sure that the high standards of hygiene and cleanliness were upheld at a time when they were quite literally in the front line of the battle against Covid-19. Kevin also had to reconfigure and signpost the entire school in preparation for the return of students before the requirement for social distancing was lifted, and then put it all back to how it was before when the regulation changed. Without one word of complaint.
- To the catering staff, led by Sonia Deakin. Sonia and her team looked after all staff and students in the emergency hub, as well as preparing the free school meals provided to families in our school community at the start of the lockdown. Sonia's "can do" attitude was just what was needed in the depths of this crisis, as were her lovingly assembled packed lunches.
- To our ground staff led by Andy Wilson. In the midst of all the turmoil and trauma of the pandemic, the school in its wonderful setting never looked more beautiful.
- To the school's admin staff and technicians, who literally kept the school and its various systems going with solution-focused optimism and painstaking attention to detail.
- Special thanks to Rosalie Beaumont, exams officer, coping with the unprecedented challenge of processing the exam results for years 11 and 13 – an absolutely enormous task on which so much depends.
- To the learning support staff, who reminded us all how essential they are to the success of our school. They did everything asked of them and more.
- To the Leadership Team of RGS, who provided me with unstinting support, encouragement, ideas, and solutions to problems that we never dreamt we would have to deal with.
- To the hard working and dedicated teaching staff of this school, who like all the others gave so much of their time, overcame their own fears and personal challenges and put the needs

of the students in our school before the needs of their own families throughout this pandemic in the delivery of learning experiences within a context that no one could ever have foreseen having to work in.

- Thanks to the parents and carers of our Ramsey Grammar School students, who took our place for a while as the educators of our children. We know that was not without its challenges, and that very often parents were juggling their own work and other family commitments at the same time as trying to teach their children. We look forward to hearing about their experiences, and to continuing to work and learn together.

And finally...

THANK YOU TO THE STUDENTS OF RAMSEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

Each one has had a uniquely different experience of lockdown. Students in Years 11 and 13 had to cope with the trauma of having the examinations they have worked hard to prepare for cancelled in front of their very eyes. Students in all years were thrust overnight into the world of virtual learning without ever having expected to be educated exclusively in this way. After the ultimate test of the much vaunted quality of resilience, we will support students in reflecting on the experience of living through a global pandemic and look forward to picking up the learning journey with them in partnership with their families.

Annette Baker

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