

Schools in Ireland experienced two major shifts in teaching and learning in 2020: the pivot to remote education in spring, then the return to a reconfigured school space in autumn. This article considers both shifts, analysing the challenges and successes in one post-primary school community.

The emergence of Covid-19 and its impact on reshaping education has been keenly felt throughout the world. In Ireland, schools experienced two major shifts in teaching and learning: first, the pivot to remote education in March, and second, the reintroduction of the physical school space to facilitate in-class teaching from August 2020. As a post-primary teacher and researcher in ICT in education, I have had the opportunity to observe and study how teachers, students, and other stakeholders have adapted to these two distinct environments during a time of great social upheaval and instability.

At the beginning of March, it became clear from news reports that lockdown was inevitable. In the week before the schools were to close, I had decided to trial numerous apps with my classes to facilitate remote learning. In pre-Covid-19 times, my school would have been defined as a typical blended-learning environment, where students integrate a suite of recommended apps in tandem with a set of hard-copy books. Smartphones were the main devices permitted for educational use in the classroom, with the teacher's permission after consultation with parents. Students often used devices as part of their completion and presentation of classroom-based assessments (CBAs).

As we headed into lockdown, I felt somewhat assured that my students could draw on these transferable skills. The transition to remote classes ran smoothly, and I was in a position to live-stream classes from 13 March. At this time, remote teaching was viewed primarily as a short-term reaction to the emerging pandemic. There was a sense of managing and containing the situation, rather than actually adapting to and living with it. No one envisaged that schools would remain physically closed until the end of August. Many believed we would be back and running within weeks.

Remote teaching during lockdown brought specific challenges, as outlined by Mohan et al. (2020). For many, the swift transition to this

Teaching and Learning from a Post-Primary Perspective

Reflections on the impact of Covid-19



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virtual world was complex. The workload was immense. From a pastoral point of view, monitoring student engagement and well-being emerged as a key feature in the response of school leaders and pastoral teams to the pandemic crisis. For me as a teacher working on the ground, liaising with the school's well-being personnel was a primary responsibility, to identify students and families in the community who needed help and support.

Developing an effective pedagogy depended on teachers' digital skills and comfort in navigating this environment. Initially, teachers had to balance the delivery of lessons with the demands of digital administration. Unsurprisingly, email communication from management, colleagues, and students quickly converged in the same chaotic space. Monitoring incoming messages via other educational apps added to this administrative load. Questions and observations from students in the physical classroom, which had enriched and informed the discussion, morphed into individual emails. This led to a more fragmented communication style, where students missed out on their peers' in-class insights.

Furthermore, as the move online was swift, there was simply no time to deliver continuing professional development (CPD) to staff and students or to establish simple and effective means to communicate. This was the case for schools and educational institutions across many countries and jurisdictions. It was therefore essential to be on hand remotely to assist colleagues with their transition online and to provide training sessions for students on how to use our main learning platform.

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Zoom fatigue was a constant reminder of the impact of screen time on one's teaching activities – both in delivering lessons and in marking work. Student and teacher screen time increased significantly, with many reports of eye strain and indeed back strain from both groups. This is in line with research on the difficulties of learning in a digital context (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019a). It is important to stress that many students and teachers were working in informal workspaces at home which were not conducive to teaching or studying.

Amidst these challenges, many students were also experiencing broadband issues, so I switched quickly to asynchronous teaching. Some were also reporting difficulty in accessing devices. Working primarily from a phone was clearly not easy, particularly for Senior Cycle students, who needed more device functionality to complete longer assignments. In many cases students were sharing devices with parents working from home and other siblings. Consequently, iPads from the school were made available to students and teachers.

Given the technical issues, the decision by textbook publishers to grant open access to their online e-books and materials was greatly appreciated. Since many teachers and students had hastily left their books and materials in the school building, this leadership from the Irish educational publishing sector was of immense help. Open resources such as Scoilnet also emerged as important sources of material to support teachers. The timely growth in resources available on Scoilnet (Marcus-Quinn et al., 2019b), which is

supported by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), played a significant role during this crisis.

Remote teaching was extremely busy and stressful for many, but it did allow the space to explore alternative means of content delivery and assessment. Feedback was a challenging aspect of remote teaching. I decided to invest in a tablet device and digital pen to optimise feedback given to written expression pieces, particularly for fifth- and sixth-year students. This made the feedback process more accessible and allowed targeted commentary to be provided.

Though classes were scheduled according to the school timetable, what worked best, in my opinion, was creating instructional video content to facilitate asynchronous learning. This allowed me to be present during class time to respond to questions posted on the online forum. This in turn provided useful revision documentation for students who were unable to attend at class time due to caring responsibilities.

A weekly live Q&A session also proved useful in balancing in-person and recorded content, particularly with the younger classes. Homework accountability was part of this routine: students were invited to upload a daily photo of their homework attempts, where possible. However, it was important to be flexible in this regard and to monitor class participation with compassion, flexibility, and understanding.

Additional forms of assessment were also trialled, including Microsoft Forms for effective assessment for learning (AFL). Some colleagues explored the use of recorded verbal feedback via Seesaw and Microsoft Teams to reduce screen time for students.

As I write this, we are back at school and adapting to teaching during the pandemic. The physical environmental changes have been striking as we have made the transition from working at home to re-engaging with the physical school space. Teacher classrooms have been replaced with student base classrooms, which double up as eating areas for students during break times. A one-way system has been established throughout the school building. Sanitising stations have been installed in all classrooms and at entrances, and all members of the school community must wear masks. Mask breaks outside in the gardens have become essential for student well-being. Windows and doors remain open at all times.

With spaces limited in the staffroom, many teachers sometimes work from their cars. It can be difficult to meet colleagues due to these new but necessary structures. Small breaks and lunch breaks are staggered to reduce congregation. Staff meetings are conducted remotely. We have Covid safety officers to ensure that the DES guidelines are being properly implemented. Class sizes have been reduced where possible to allow for social distancing. We have specific seating plans for each class, to facilitate contact tracing. Shared spaces such as the study hall, canteen, and library have been repurposed as dedicated classrooms.

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Tests and notes must be quarantined for seventy-two hours. Our school is also encouraging students to leave their books at home and to bring a device to school instead, in order to reduce touch points. We have migrated to a single dedicated learning platform, Microsoft Teams, to simplify access for students. Cleaning has become a normal part of our classroom routine. As we travel to class and sanitise workstations on entry and before we leave, there is an inevitable loss of teaching time.

These essential health and safety measures now influence our pedagogical practice as we adapt our methodologies to teach effectively and safely. What felt new and surreal at the end of August have become accepted norms in our present working conditions. Collegial support and teacher professionalism have been instrumental in the successful reopening of schools. The repurposed school environment has brought about cultural and behavioural changes, which are becoming more embedded and established day by day.

As we face into a difficult winter, we as educators must address the difficulties that Covid-19 will bring. Managing the crisis will be challenging (Hourigan et al., 2020). Students, particularly sixth years, will require additional home learning supports, particularly if they are self-isolating or caring for loved ones. This highlights many questions, particularly in finding creative solutions for students who may not be able to attend school or sit exams. The issue of teachers who need to go on sick leave will also be problematic for schools (Hourigan and Marcus-Quinn, 2020).

It goes without saying that maintaining solidarity and providing compassionate support to our whole school community are essential now as we navigate this difficult and uncertain terrain together.

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Reform is usually possible only once a sense of crisis takes hold.

- Charles Duhigg