The Covid-19 pandemic has presented enormous challenges in post-primary education. This article gives a small insight into one school's digital journey before school closure and the challenges and opportunities since schools closed in March 2020.

Coláiste Bhaile Chláir's Digital Learning Journey and Covid-19

One school's story of accelerated growth during the pandemic

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven people, organisations, schools, and the nation as a whole towards new work practices and routines. According to UNESCO, which has tracked the impact on education, on 10 April there were 188 country-wide closures, with almost 1.6 billion affected learners. While schools and education systems are notoriously slow to change, the pandemic has massively accelerated the embedding of digital learning in our second-level schools.

Prior to March 2020, the vast majority of schools were using digital technologies to support and enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. PowerPoint, laptops, data projectors, Kahoot, and Quizlet could be seen in most schools and classrooms around the country. A smaller cohort use devices on a one-to-one basis as a digital reader replacing physical textbooks, with the added feature of access to online resources and applications such as those mentioned, Google Classroom, or Microsoft Teams.

Our school, Coláiste Bhaile Chláir (CBC) in County Galway, fell into the latter group, with one-to-one devices. However, when we first opened our doors in 2013, we chose to replace digital textbooks with teacher-created learning resources using Microsoft OneNote.

Seven years preparing – and still not ideal!

When word came on 12 March that schools were to close, we were in a good but not ideal position. We had spent the previous seven years focusing on an agreed collective approach to the technologies we use to enhance teaching and learning. As in many schools, practice was not uniform. But we had a solid baseline of agreed practice right across the school, for junior cycle in particular.

Starting in 2013, each subject department came together and created a master set of resources for each subject. These were shared in OneNote. A

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teaching and learning resource that could be shared with students started to emerge. Resources, content, and learning activities were drawn from many sources. Teachers acted as curators and creators of new content, guided by key leaders in the school.

Over the years, exceptional practice emerged from different subject departments, which was shared across others. At the same time we recruited up to ten teachers annually, each one an excellent teacher rather than a great user of IT. All the development using OneNote was supported by a continuing professional development (CPD) programme based in the school to upskill teachers in proficient use of the software.

We have always told new teachers to forget about the technology at first – use the device in a few weeks, and just use your board marker, whiteboard, and knowledge to begin with. Over time, teachers use the technology in amazing ways as they become comfortable with it. However, one of the keys for us was the simplicity of OneNote, the product we used as a core for our teaching and learning resources.

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Our digital learning journey has always been about evolution and growing exceptional practice from within the group of teachers. Collaboration and constantly learning from one another are key. Supporting students along this journey is also key. A constant focus is to give them the skills not just to use the software but to use and navigate it effectively. The introduction of key skills in junior cycle was a significant factor in the successful embedding of practice among students.

As the school grew, we did not ask teachers to also create content at senior cycle – although many teachers have – as this is a much bigger task and possibly, hopefully, will be more timely when a review of senior cycle occurs. Our students moving to senior cycle had built up a skill set and knowledge base on how to engage effectively with digital learning.

School closure challenges

Using technology in new ways – new pedagogy

For both teacher and students, sitting in a room together – whether in rows or groups – is what we enjoy best about school. Talking, engaging, interacting, learning, and teaching in a face-to-face environment can never be replaced. Hand movements, individual eye contact, body language, and reading the room are essential for effective teaching and learning to happen.

Moving online, where not only students but teachers were afraid to turn on their cameras, is extremely challenging. Most teachers' first natural inclination is to replicate their traditional classroom. Very few have taught online lessons, and if they have, it was probably to fellow teachers or adults as part of a CPD or university programme. Teaching teenagers online is very different!

Digital divide

Covid-19 had the potential to exacerbate the existing disparities in education for so many people. Not every school was on a level playing field. Some had just started their digital learning journey, while others were well advanced. Even in the latter, there are always challenges. We were lucky in that all of our junior cycle and some of our senior students have a device. So our divide was less challenging than others', but then we must consider infrastructure at home, broadband, the ability to log on with parents and siblings at home, and teenagers potentially babysitting younger siblings.

Disconnection from society

Students and teachers may have been physically apart, but they were digitally together, something many in society – especially those under thirty – are more comfortable with. Many of our students spend a significant proportion of their social life on social media platforms. But most have school, sport, youth clubs, and music venues to interact and physically engage with one another, and this brings a healthy balance.

For many students, a lot of physical social interactions happen in the classroom. Even if they are not best friends or in a large social circle, it is critically important for their mental health to participate in class discussions, see people face to face, and engage with a teacher. One of the greatest challenges we faced during lockdown and school closure was to support those students who struggle socially, who may not have a wide social circle, and who felt isolated at home.

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Our guidance team, supported by year heads and the deputy principals, played a huge role in this. They facilitated and supported social meet-ups online, got students to turn their cameras on to see somebody, and phoned and stayed connected with students they had already been supporting. They ran live online assemblies, and we monitored student attendance. More and more students who may not have presented to our counsellors previously were now on our radar. Touching base with students who were not engaging became really important, as did supporting and highlighting concerns to parents.

School closure and re-opening

Acceleration of schools' digital learning journey

We were in the process of rolling out Microsoft Teams and had just started to map out a CPD plan. We had successfully integrated its use into a number of subject departments and with individual teachers – those who wanted to use it! The lockdown allowed us to accelerate our plans for a school-wide rollout. We did not make it compulsory to use, but rather used it for all school-wide events and meetings, demonstrating its usefulness. This was all with a view to rolling it out school-wide upon our return in September 2020.

It also allowed us to trial different things with lower-risk year groups like first and second year. We expanded our use of online assessments for end-of-year exams, for example. We wanted to see what worked best so we could build it into our future plans.

From a teaching culture to a learning culture

Much of the work we do in CBC is about empowering students by giving them the skills to learn for themselves. But they need to be taught a certain amount of knowledge, so we aimed to support teachers in how best to structure their online teaching, for example by offering support and advice on asynchronous and synchronous online classes, and supporting and encouraging subject departments to talk about how things were going for them online.

Our English department decided to change how they approach the teaching of a number of topics, given how well online classes went and the amount of material they were covering. In fact, they wondered why they had been doing things a certain way for years!

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Students' use of digital collaboration tools increased exponentially. They could no longer collaborate in small groups in the classroom; instead they scheduled Teams meetings, shared PowerPoint presentations to work on collectively, and used collaboration spaces in OneNote. These are tools and skill sets they will use later in life – whether in work or study.

Teachers learning alongside students

Great teachers are model learners. Those who don't know it all and aren't afraid to show weakness or discomfort with the technology; those who said, 'I too struggle to turn on my camera and deliver live lessons' but overcame it with their students; those who were open to learning alongside their students – they are an inspiration to their students.

We were all on a learning journey during school closure. I firmly believe that coming together to learn new technologies and navigate our way together through the toughest months brought our school community closer together. Constantly asking students how we can do this better together was and continues to be a vital part of our journey in CBC.

The future

Even before the pandemic, education in many schools was undergoing a transformation that will go on long after the virus subsides. But it is essential that we take the best of what worked well. We should also be slow to discard what did not work effectively. As with any transformation, it takes time, and mistakes will be made. In the words of W. Edwards Deming, 'Long-term commitment to new learning and new philosophy is required of any management that seeks transformation. The timid and the fainthearted, and the people that expect quick results, are doomed to disappointment.'

We will continue to try out new things on our digital learning journey. We will continue to make mistakes, but we will take our time, learn from mistakes, identify what works well, and above all not be afraid to take big steps and do things in the best interests of our students to prepare them for a very different world.

The significant efforts made by the entire education system to respond to the huge changes in such a short space of time this year shows us what is possible: the move to online learning overnight, calculated grading for the Leaving Certificate, sitting of exams in November (a potential second chance for some), the cancellation of Junior Certificate exams, the coming together of students and school staff to protect one another by wearing facemasks. We should seize the opportunity over the months ahead to quickly take stock and address some of the issues we previously considered difficult or impossible to implement.

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ASTI Remote Convention, 24 July 2020

Deirdre Mac Donald, ASTI President 2019-2020, and Kieran Christie, ASTI General Secretary, at the union's remote convention held in ASTI HQ.