

Student-teacher engagement in the remote learning environment

There are some surprising outcomes from our remote teaching and learning experiences. Mainly, that it is much more successful than we imagined and some of our learners are engaging in ways that we couldn't have predicted.

The rapport between teachers and students is noticeable, learners seem to understand that teachers are working hard to create content. Learners have become more cooperative, they make suggestions about delivery of classes, create quizzes, contact students who may have missed a class and are more confident in being part of the learning process. Lockdown has created a more communal learning environment and this is a surprising consequence. We as a college have pulled together, teacher and student.

Some of our neuro diverse students have said that they are enjoying the distance created by remote teaching. They can choose when to talk and when to be seen by muting or unmuting their microphone, turning their camera on or off and completing their work in the sanctuary of their homes. One student, completing his course and about to go off to university, said that he enjoys his lockdown lessons as he doesn't have to worry about participating in groups and trying to read and understand the body language and facial expressions of other students. He is looking forward to the remote sessions offered at university. This delivery fits seamlessly with the complexities of neuro diversity.

Self-motivated and independently minded learners are enthusiastic about the way they are now learning - in their own time, at their own pace, distraction free.

It's not all positive news, students with learning needs can be overwhelmed by the experience. Without the one to one support they could rely on in the classroom, many are finding it difficult to recognise if they are on course, despite constant reassurance. Our Learner Support teams are working hard to keep our students connected, talk with the student and their parents and guardians but it's hard to replace the connection of face to face contact.

Students with poor attendance before lockdown or students who struggle to maintain focus have further to go to remain on track in remote sessions. Feedback from them is that they find remote teaching and instruction difficult to manage as they are more successful with face to face and one to one attention and encouragement. Anyone who has tried to 'get in' on a remote conversation will appreciate how hard it is sometimes to interrupt the speaker and less engaged students do not want to ask questions.

Teenage anxieties are at their most heightened. Students will turn their camera on if they see others have already. If not, the teacher is talking to a series of ID symbols on screen. This brings its own problems for teachers. We decided to use team teaching wherever possible in order to create a more dynamic learning space to avoid any flatness in delivery and response.

The remote teaching environment allows teachers to re-evaluate and re-connect with their knowledge and understanding of pedagogy.

Classroom management anxieties for teachers have diminished, students are mostly paying attention. Students only talk to other students in permissible places, e.g. in break out rooms or by using the chat function. This has meant that teachers can focus on teaching and assessment, without having to manage distractions.

Teachers have developed an uber positive approach to engage learners. We're always happy, always positive and always available to provide support. For the college, rapport between teacher and student is at an all-time high. Teachers have stepped up, embraced the technology and provided a reassuring and supportive place for students in very troubling and anxious times.

Our teachers have, like Spiderman, a 'Spidey sense', the ability to know when a student is in trouble, not engaging, about to switch off. Remote teaching demands a heightened awareness of this. How do we know what's happening when we can't read a room because the room is a remote one? Experienced teachers will intuitively know who these learners are, offer a one to one session, create small group sessions, and have rigorous tracking of student work and achievement.

Remote teaching can be a positive experience. It can enhance learning and allow students to demonstrate their technological competence; as digital natives they are well accustomed to a virtual space. Remote learning can be beneficial as it provides a focused environment and is appropriate for the digital climate. However, the majority of students we asked said that they missed being in a class and being with their friends. To optimise their experience, future learning for us will be a blend of face to face and remote teaching with strategic attention to differentiation and safeguarding of learners. We can provide digital backgrounds for the students so that their privacy is secured. Encourage, cajole, persuade students to turn on their cameras so that the learning environment is as live as possible. Hold many more one to one meetings to support all learners, deliver more flipped learning sessions to challenge and expand knowledge and understanding. This way, when we begin our blended approach in the new term, no-one falls behind.