

GUEST COLUMN - December 2020

Keith Grainger, Principal, Garth Hill College

The case for the defence: online learning

In a week when the government has threatened councils with legal action over decisions to switch to online learning over coronavirus fears, I feel the urge to celebrate the considerable merits of online learning. Such threats almost cast a slur on the very concept of online learning and, given our positive experience as a state secondary school, I am compelled to make a case for the defence.

In common with many other schools, we had no choice but to move to online learning at the beginning of December.

In recent weeks, many colleagues and students have tested positive. As increasing numbers of staff became unavailable to work on site due to the requirement to self-isolate, we rapidly reached the point when we simply did not have enough staff to open to more than sixth formers and key worker and vulnerable children.

This could have been disastrous for our students' education, but there is a growing belief that online learning has been a singular success in the final weeks of the autumn term. Parents' generous and open comments have included:

'Live lessons are clearly bringing a clear sense of 'I have a full day of lessons today and need to focus on school work'. To a point that my daughter will say, 'I've got a break now for lunch but I have to go back at 1:40pm'. As a parent working from home, this is great as it brings structure and the unforeseen happy situation of being able to have lunch together as a family and an opportunity to talk about how the morning has been.'

'We have completed our first week of online learning - I've been in the fortunate position of juggling my diary to keep our son out of your keyworker provision. I was moved to let you know how impressed I am with the commitment, energy and engagement of your team of staff.'

'My son works away in his bedroom while I am next door in the study and there is such a positive feel about his lessons.'

'Really proud of my daughter for getting on so well with it all. Her maths teacher has definitely perked up spirits whilst she's at home, Mission Impossible theme tune and other little bits of music, it's made us laugh and work is getting done. It's great.'

Our students' engagement with online learning to date has been excellent with high levels of attendance across all years. Expectations are clear. Students should continue to study from home accessing the work set and taking part in live lessons as per their normal timetable.

Colleagues have worked tirelessly. In most cases, where a teacher is ill and unable to teach live, classes have been picked up by other colleagues, sometimes delivering live lessons to *two* or *three* classes at a time. Quite extraordinary from my perspective as headteacher: technology is enabling us to mimic the Victorian monitorial system of schooling and provision is good.

Colleagues have shared their enthusiasm at being able to respond to the class chat with their own spontaneous posts linking to further resources, clips, sound files or other supporting information. Students are engaging, modelling to others and sharing their work, in some cases with a confidence rarely seen in the normal classroom.

Registers are taken, including at the beginning and end of the day as students check in with form tutors. Non-attendance is followed up with an email or call home. Parents are expected to contact the school if their child is unable to attend online due to illness. Attendance compares very favourably with normal school attendance during these unparalleled times.

One crucial aspect in this recent success is that we had no choice but to close the school to all Years 7-11 and this has meant that *all* efforts are focused on online learning. A blended approach with some year groups in school and others at home would have made some of the above impossible. It would have been the worst of both worlds.

The plan is to re-open school to all students after the Christmas break. We very much look forward to everyone being together in the school building again.

Yet I do wonder: when all this is over, shall I receive any enquiries from parents asking if we can return online?