MAKE SURE YOUR EDTECH WORKS FOR YOU

Ben Whitaker takes a look at a year in EdTech and supporting teachers and pupils post-lockdown.

After nearly a year and a half of living in a pandemic, throughout school closures, national and local lockdowns and isolation; we have all come to appreciate the vital role played by technology in facilitating our professional and personal lives.

Nowhere is that plainer to see than in the field of education, as teachers and school staff worked tirelessly to adapt to an entirely new way of delivering learning, often having to quickly get to grips with platforms they were unfamiliar with.

It's clear that something of an overnight revolution in education took place, as schools around the world continue to utilise educational technology post-lockdown. Although most of us are internally weary of the phrase 'new normal', it does admittedly point to a valuable idea – how can we capitalise upon the momentum of the past year, and convert it into tangible progression? Which elements of EdTech will be worth carrying over into our new, hybrid way of school life, and how might they help address inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic?

Attainment and asessment

The impact of the pandemic on education is well-documented, as school closures around the world have affected a staggering 87.6 per cent of the world's learners. On top of this, pupils from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds were disproportionately more likely to be negatively affected, as many lacked the necessary digital equipment or study space to effectively participate in remote learning.

Technological interventions can help quickly gauge each individual learner's aptitude and provide teachers with a clear picture of the varying levels of attainment in their class.

Regularly checking in with students throughout and at the end of lessons allows teachers to instantly capture students' feedback and understanding of a particular topic. For example, when using classroom. cloud, teachers can send students a question with a selection of pre-defined responses. Responses are then gathered for the teacher to browse and see who may need additional support, which can also be shared in the form of a pie chart with students too.

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Now that children in the UK are back in the classroom, assessment tools will play an integral role in the national educational recovery from school closures. Teachers can only provide targeted 'catch-up' interventions if they are fully aware of where knowledge gaps might exist.

Classroom management and safeguarding

Navigating classroom management can be challenging at the best of times, but keeping students motivated remotely presents even more difficulties. There are a plethora of distractions just a touch of a button away, which continue to persist when physically learning in school using a computer or personal laptop. Teachers face the struggle of competing with the appealing glow of another social media notification, and with more than half of British children regularly using TikTok, it's clear the problem isn't going away anytime soon.

Monitoring software programmes can help teachers quickly check if attention spans have waned through scanning activities, applications and websites in real time in order to keep pupils focussed and on task. In more disruptive classes or if something needs to be urgently communicated, teachers can even lock the entire group's screens.

Robust digital monitoring is also a key part of ensuring pupils are not only staying on
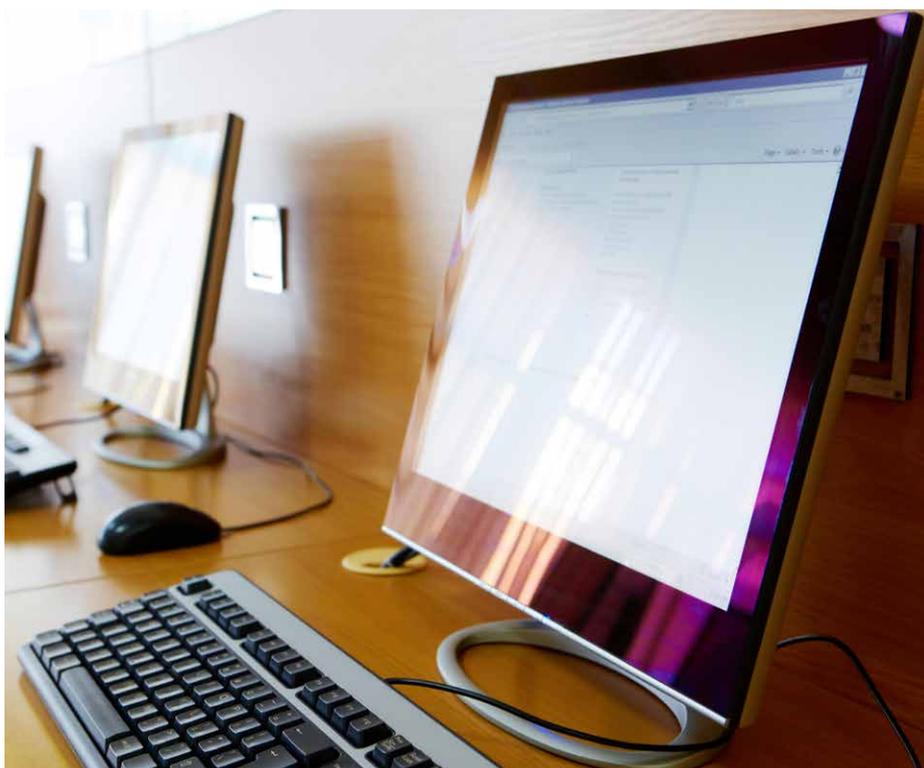
task, but staying safe. Troubling statistics have revealed that 75 per cent of social media in the UK uses an algorithm which routinely introduces strangers to children, such as Facebook's 'People you may know' feature or Snapchat's 'Quick add' tool. With a further 74 per cent of children reporting that they had seen something harmful online, it is crucial that school infrastructures can provide a safe place for children through shielding them from unsuitable content. One way to do this is specifying 'allowed' and 'restricted' websites and applications, to ensure that when children are in school they are only accessing lesson-related materials.

Continuity

While instances of isolation have certainly reduced, they are yet to be eliminated altogether. With the possibility of Covid-19 transmission still on the horizon, children and teachers alike must remain mindful. Whenever pupils or staff might need to self-isolate, cloud-based learning platforms can help deliver high-quality learning experiences, no matter if participants are in or out of the classroom. Equipping teachers with the option to seamlessly switch between in-class and remote learning provides vital continuity and helps to minimise disruption wherever possible.

Moreover, looking beyond the pandemic, it seems extremely likely that blended learning in some form is here to stay – whether it's to help learners with additional needs who benefit from a quieter environment, or even to overcome barriers to attending physical school such as traffic or public transport issues on 'snow days'.

Teacher and pupil wellbeing

It is no secret that the stress of living and working throughout a pandemic has been a universally challenging experience. However, this is even truer for teachers and school staff, who faced systemic issues with concerns around workload, work-life balance and wellbeing even before the onset of Covid-19. A recent survey conducted by NASUWT found that almost three in ten teachers (27 per cent) reported needing to see a doctor or medical professional to help with the detrimental impact of the pandemic on their mental and physical health. Earlier research by The Guardian revealed high levels of anxiety, exhaustion and fear – triggering many to

consider quitting the profession altogether.

All (good) EdTech, now more than ever, should be designed with the needs of our educators in mind. Any learning technology that does not relieve the burden from already stretched teachers is failing to adapt to these fast-paced times. At Bury Grammar School our teacher feedback for our EdTech platform of choice has been overwhelmingly positive, with staff commenting on how intuitive and easy it is to use. Through a combination of its assessment, tracking, classroom management and continuity features, the platform frees up valuable time for teachers to do what they do best: teach.

In a similar vein, it's equally important to prioritise the mental and emotional wellbeing of pupils, who have endured huge levels of instability and uncertainty over the last year. As many as one in six young people are now estimated to have a mental health problem, and while extra government funding has been allocated to address the growing crisis, shorter term solutions are also necessary.

For example, classroom.cloud allows students who might be more self-conscious about speaking in front of their peers to ask for help privately. Not only does this reduce feelings of anxiety, but it also empowers them to receive the support they need and meet their goals.

Ultimately, schools have to ensure EdTech works for them and not the other way around. The strongest EdTech platforms and products enhance teaching and learning, and slot seamlessly into the fabric of classroom life and the curriculum. Each school community will serve a different, diverse group of staff and students, and any technology must reflect each unique context.

Get the most out of EdTech

DIGITAL STRATEGY – embarking on an edtech development programme is pointless without a robust digital strategy. Do your research and ensure all of your stakeholder needs are properly addressed before falling for the latest gimmick. Free guides (like this one bit.ly/2Vs71Aj) can help you strategise.

STAFF CPD – while many teachers' confidence with tech has hugely improved over the last year, it's key that schools continue to support their teachers through regular CPD.

SAFEGUARDING – all adults working in schools have a legal responsibility to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and even more so when some students may have to study from home due to virus exposure.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT – all teachers appreciate the importance of gaining parental buy-in and the need to form relationships that are built on trust. Whether it's a virtual letter about a school trip or simply a quick update message, EdTech platforms can help streamline parental communications to boost engagement and keep parents in the loop.