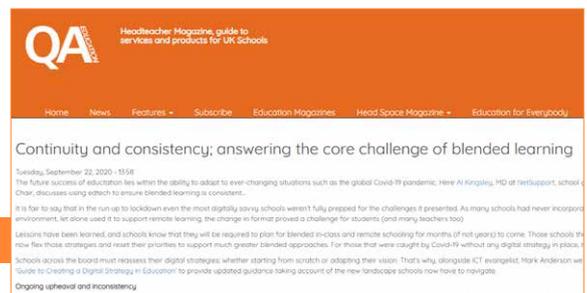


Continuity and consistency; answering the core challenge of blended learning

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The future success of education lies within the ability to adapt to ever-changing situations such as the global Covid-19 pandemic. Here **Al Kingsley, MD at NetSupport**, school governor for 15 years and Multi-Academy Trust Chair, discusses using edtech to ensure blended learning is consistent...

It is fair to say that in the run up to lockdown even the most digitally savvy schools weren't fully prepped for the challenges it presented. As many schools had never incorporated edtech consistently into the classroom environment, let alone used it to support remote learning, the change in format proved a challenge for students (and many teachers too).

Lessons have been learned, and schools know that they will be required to plan for blended in-class and remote schooling for months (if not years) to come. Those schools that already had digital strategies in place must now flex those strategies and reset their priorities to support much greater blended approaches. For those that were caught by Covid-19 without any digital strategy in place, it has been an even steeper learning curve.

Schools across the board must reassess their digital strategies; whether starting from scratch or adapting their vision. That's why, alongside ICT evangelist, Mark Anderson we have released a

new version of the popular '**Guide to Creating a Digital Strategy in Education**' to provide updated guidance taking account of the new landscape schools now have to navigate.

Ongoing upheaval and inconsistency

In speaking with school leaders, it has been clear that a major obstacle faced by schoolteachers and students during lockdown was that of inconsistency. Just a few weeks into the new term **schools across Britain** have been subject to closures and classes directed to self-isolate in response to coronavirus, with teaching again moving out of the classroom to remote models. This inconsistency and upheaval is a huge challenge to overcome.

With the need to switch easily between class and home, schools must seek to implement EdTech that delivers that vital sense of consistency and continuity across all classroom environments, be it virtual or real. Continuity and consistency must now be a core pillar of schools' digital strategies, not just to answer immediate needs but to ensure robust, strategic focus for the future.

By adopting class management technologies that are as relevant and useful in the classroom as they are in the home-learning environment, schools can achieve seamless integration in between the two. As the National

Foundation for Educational Research **recently recommended**, in preparing their remote learning plans, schools should give consideration to:

"...making sure that the school has an effective platform for sharing work with pupils and receiving submitted work, such as a virtual learning environment (VLE); making provision for online lessons, and for interactions between pupils and teachers and between pupils and other pupils; providing activities that involve consolidating learning; using strategies that focus on helping pupils to become independent learners."

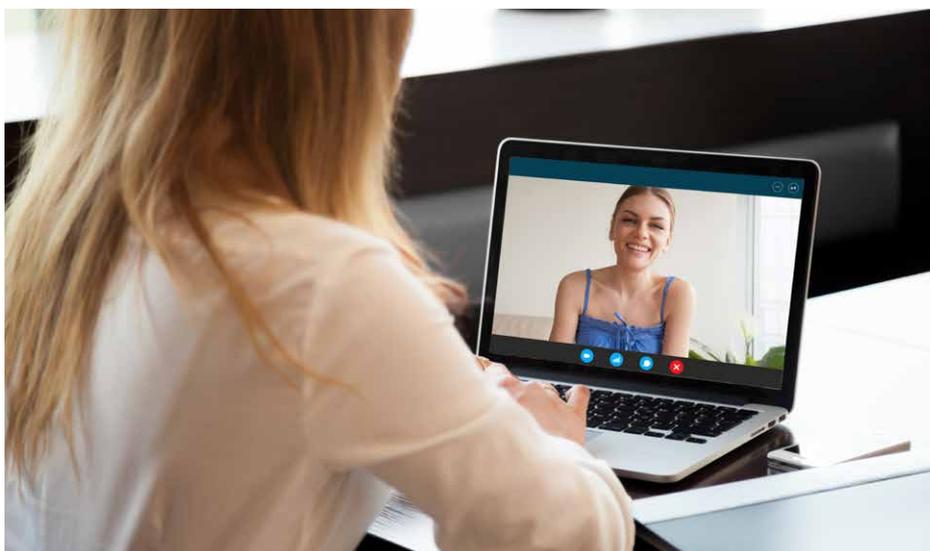
In answering the ongoing need for blended learning, school leaders must now assess how to create virtual learning environments that provide consistency and continuity, but that also ensure effective support for teaching and engagement for learners.

Cloud-powered, blended learning makes it possible for teachers to create a virtual classroom that can function efficiently no matter where you and your students are located. Of course, in order for this to be a smooth experience, you'll need the right kind of platform, featuring a variety of tools that assist in behaviour management, feedback and communication, making online learning as engaging as the ideal in-class environment. Functionality aside, a solution is only successful if it's easy to use and staff have confidence working with it.

Four must-have features for blended learning platforms

1. Screen locks and monitoring

All teachers know how difficult it can be to get your students' attention. When you've got a class of 25-30 students, it's essential to be able to get everyone engaged to get every lesson off to a good start.



Being able to lock your students' screens minimises disruptions and enables teachers to get everyone's attention quickly and efficiently. If you need to explain a concept, set learning goals or simply convey important information, having the ability to lock screens in an instant is invaluable.

Similarly, by selecting edtech platforms that allow easy monitoring, you'll find it easier than ever to ensure your students remain on task throughout lessons. With real-time monitoring tools, you can check what a student is doing, watching or listening to at any time. This gives teachers the tools and authority they need to keep pupils on track and manage their lessons with ease.

2. Multi-Platform Functionality

When you're choosing which virtual classroom solution to use, be sure to consider the wide range of platforms that students will be using. If pupils are learning from home, for example, they might be trying to access the platform on desktops, laptops, tablets or even phones. With so many manufacturers and operating systems, it's vital that your edtech functions optimally across a wide range of platforms.

3. Student Interaction

Interaction is at the heart of learning, so it should be a top priority when it comes to classroom and remote learning edtech tools. Without effective interaction functionality, lessons delivered by edtech become a passive experience for students. When your platform facilitates interaction, however, students can play an active role in the learning experience and gain more from your lessons.

Help requests enable students to resolve queries, for example, while group chats ensure that students can work collaboratively, even if they're physically distanced. Additionally, student surveys and feedback forms give you the opportunity to determine which areas students may be struggling with and what virtual learning techniques they're gaining the most from.

4. Increased Permissions

No matter the age of your students, it's essential to have control over their



internet usage on school time. Being able to set permissions ensures that you can restrict the websites and applications that are available to your students via the school network.

As well as shielding pupils from inappropriate content, this feature helps to keep students focused and minimises class disruptions. By restricting access to social media, for example, you can remove the temptation to log on to recreational websites. When you're choosing edtech platforms, software or tools, be sure to factor this into your decision-making process.

Continuity and consistency in times of change

The benefits of classroom management tools that enable remote learning extend far beyond the immediate need for home-learning. The ability to take greater control, communicate

with students and monitor their online activity not to mention benefits of shared access to files, class surveys and other resources are as useful in the classroom as they are at a distance. Schools that acclimatise their community to these tools now will reap the rewards in respect of seamless continuity and consistency in the face of change – both key qualities that have been greatly missed in recent times.

About the author:

Al Kingsley, MD of NetSupport has been a school governor for the last 15 years and is currently Chair of Hampton Academies Trust in Peterborough and KWEST Trust in Norfolk. Al was appointed the Chair of the Cambridge & Peterborough county SEND panel in 2018 to steer focused improvements across the Local Authorities Special Educational needs and Disabilities support provisions. Al sits on the Regional Schools Commissioners Headteacher board for North London and the South East, and works closely with the local authority and all schools across the region to help improve standards of leadership, governance and develop greater levels of challenge and accountability in our schools.

