

Blog

“Only **connect!** That was the whole of her sermon. Only **connect** the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer.” E.M. Forster

If I tell you I am an English teacher, as well as a senior leader, you will not be surprised by my choice of quote. But as we reach the 12th week of lockdown and the ups and downs of trying to pave a clear way through these unprecedented times, I have been surprised that so many positive things are coming out of a such a terrible situation. Indeed, the overwhelming lesson I have taken from this experience is the way in which people’s human nature has prevailed and the desire to remain connected is seeing us through this crisis.

Whether it is our desire to connect with and applaud the people on the front line in the NHS who are saving lives, or whether it is on a much more micro level, that I find myself in, as part of a school community or as part of the teaching profession, it is the need to connect and maintain or even improve our relationships that has given me a sense of hope for the future.

A huge surge of innovation and activity took place the week the lockdown was announced at our school. Our team, like staff in schools across the nation, immediately sought ways to ensure our students would remain connected to us and their learning. Whether it was putting together new booklets, staff upskilling themselves or upskilling our students in terms of remote learning and digital resources, hives of activity appeared everywhere around the school to plan for the future and to take into account the diverse personal situations that students might find themselves in at home the following week.

That pro-activity and innovation has continued. Whilst my role at Wapping High is to lead on Learning and Teaching, I have been buoyed by how, as a team, we are all creating, revising and finding new ways for students to learn on a daily basis and I find myself excited by my colleagues’ innovation and determination. It has made me reflect on my role as a leader. The hardest aspect of leading, is when you have to force through change against a tide of resistance, but if those around you are inspired to think anew and to recreate and re-emerge with new approaches then the role of the senior leader becomes truly invigorating and your role becomes much more one of enabling and supporting breakthroughs. One simple way I have been able to remotely foster and capture this daily sharing of great practice has been a central set of google slides where everyone contributes new ideas on remote learning. This resource has been at the heart of connections between colleagues and has provided a constant springboard for review and for refining our remote pedagogy. This has also enabled me and many others to share useful emerging ideas and practice from outside the school, enabling us to remain at the cutting edge of what is possible. The lockdown has also led to an explosion of teaching professionals sharing their expertise for free and so we have also been sharing links to great training, new free learning resources, blogs and podcasts; ensuring we have suddenly been immersed in horizon scanning of a very different nature from before.

Ironically, many of us have been connecting with other professionals from across the UK and even internationally at a much faster speed since the restrictions began than was ever possible before. At Wapping we already have a culture of being outward facing and indeed have links with schools in the UK and abroad and yet even with the best will in the world we can't always be off site at conferences or visiting other schools as that takes us away from our core work with our own students. However, within one week of lockdown, TeachMeets, free courses and conferences had sprung up and it suddenly became possible to either hear from pioneering educators from across the globe or to contribute to a debate or network and share our strategies, all from the comfort of our homes. Many of us have seized this opportunity to collaborate with other schools, to share ideas and to gain new insights and skills; our newer colleagues especially have relished the opportunity to attend TeachMeets and complete courses online, clearly hungry to develop and learn and not to just stand still because of the pandemic.

And what about our great students in all of this? Like their teachers, some have seized the lockdown and distance learning as a great opportunity and our regular student surveys tell us that some of our cohort actually enjoy the independence of working at home, organising their own schedule, working at their own pace without interruptions from their peers...or indeed from their teachers! Our surveys have also been uplifting with their comments full of gratitude for the work that the staff are doing to support them; many stating that they felt 'learning was still very varied just like it would be in school.' Others, of course, have struggled more with the challenges of distance learning, but as we have begun to create videos to go with their lessons and especially now that we are offering more live, synchronous lessons, their motivation and enjoyment of learning has begun to return. In fact, the first year 9 live lesson I scheduled, was attended by all the more 'reluctant' learners, one of whom even sent me an email to thank me, pleading with me to keep providing live lessons - clearly even he had had enough of life at home on his PS4!

Live lessons have also provided us, as teachers, with the much needed connection we so much enjoy with our students. As soon as I started live lessons, I felt uplifted and I was reminded that it is often the warmth and humour that the students provide in one's daily school interactions that make our job such a pleasure. Within minutes, the live lessons also enable teachers to gauge what students are finding too easy or too complicated and what misconceptions need to be addressed. It is these live interactions that provide us with instantaneous and nuanced feedback in a way that emails and surveys can never capture, as well as helping us to check on our students' general wellbeing.

One of my weekly highlights over the last few months, has been shifting my lunchtime Italian club from the music room to an online live club. I thought this would be a great way to keep in touch with a number of students and families that had not been in the UK for long and so might be feeling particularly isolated. Our online club has been a lively affair and become a firm favourite with the students. Populated mainly with year 7s, their enthusiasm has been extraordinary and I have delighted in

the way they have taken over the leadership of the club, sending out meeting reminders and pairing up to devise weekly Italian quizzes for us to take part in – and indeed for me to lose! Apart from providing me with an hour of laughter, one of the by-products of the club has been the informal student feedback they like to give me on a whole host of matters. Parents have also been able to use it as a quick way to touch base with me and so those useful informal conversations we might have had at the school gates have been able to continue. Over the weeks, other social groups have also evolved in our virtual school with our learning mentors and teaching assistants taking a lead in creating weekly small group interventions so students can re-connect in smaller bubbles over their learning. Thus those human connections are re-emerging within the school in lots of guises and colleagues are noticing how many of the relationships are actually strengthening.

So, what do I hope we will take forward into the future? There is no doubt that students have been able to reflect on their own learning and schools will surely want to use this as a catalyst for students to become more self-aware as learners and to understand the power of being able to self-direct or problem solve without a teacher at hand. We have also learnt to not just make the best of a bad job, but we have all found new ways of constructing learning, we have found new resources, new digital platforms and tools to draw on that can only enhance our pedagogy and our learning environment at Wapping in the future. The way in which we optimise homework and opportunities for flipped learning have also really opened up and building on this more effectively will be key. Staff are also keen to build on the new networks outside of the school that they have built. But ultimately, we have been reminded that relationships and connections are what make us thrive, and so I think we are all looking forward to re-connecting with our young people and families in person.

And of course, on a personal note, I am looking forward to returning to my Italian club, in the music room, with a panettone in hand, to thank my students for keeping me truly smiling though all of this. A presto.

Nicolette Sorba
Wapping High
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