

Screens, Mental Health, Innovation, and the Global Pandemic

In Prof Sonia Blandford's final Blog during the run-up to World Mental Health Day, she reflects on the long-term consequences of digital solutions to the global pandemic, and explores where next, in terms of teaching, learning and curriculum design.



The unintended outcome of COVID-19 was an increase in screen time for the majority of children and young people. This has been a global phenomenon, as referenced by the University of Seville, citing a 30% increase in the use of mobile phones by their students during lockdown¹.

Educators, the world over have spent the last 6 – 9 months creating on-line material to deliver lessons to their students, replicating timetables in a synchronous or asynchronous manner. Student attendance at sessions has been checked, followed up with strict instructions to parents and carers that their children must join. Indeed, parents and carers have complained when their children have not been sent material, commenting negatively as to the online availability of teachers and leaders.

The world has flipped in favour of screen time²³.

Since the start of COVID-19 in December 2019, there has been a proliferation of guidance, lessons, expert technology advice and related material, much of which is unmonitored, lacking in evidence, and reliant on teachers', parents' and carers' to decide on what is most appropriate for the children in their care⁴.

The common approach to each of these guides has been to follow a timetable, not dissimilar to a regular school day filled with information lessons or modules that, in the main, encourage the

¹ https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-09/uos-sut092920.php

² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/guidance-reports/using-digital-technology-to-improve-learning/>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54363069>

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/education/coronavirus-education-country-notes.htm>

learner to participate in undifferentiated activity irrespective of their challenge or need, delivered according to the curriculum plan that had been determined prior to the impact of COVID-19.

Educators, researchers, consultants, and others engaged in the delivery of this material have become focussed on blended⁵ or hybrid learning⁶, with little or no reference to the many children who have been unable to access learning delivered in this way or the impact on the mental-health of those that do. The concern of policy commentators has been on the impact of non-engagement on social mobility and ‘closing the gap’ – National Federation of Educational Research⁷, Education Policy Institute⁸, and the Sutton Trust⁹, amongst others. There is also significant concern expressed by parents on the impact of the approach taken by schools on children identified with special educational needs^{10 11}.

The emphasis has been on learning by stealth, through a catalogue of lessons delivered live or recorded by increasingly tired and anxious teachers¹².

The information led approach to education is one that had been questioned by Sir Ken Robinson in his much-celebrated TED talk, ‘*Do Schools Kill Creativity*’, first broadcast in 2006. Sir Ken and I were trained at Bretton Hall College in West Yorkshire, established in the 1949, based on the philosophy of its founder, Sir Alec Clegg

“There are two kinds of education: the education of the mind by imparting facts and teaching skills, and the education of the spirit ... the child's loves and hates, his hopes and fears, or in other terms, his courage, his integrity, his compassion and other great human qualities”¹³

Sir Ken’s comments were focused on the impact of a curriculum created to *impart knowledge rather than creativity that develops courage, integrity, compassion, and other human qualities*, which is the very same curriculum replicated online today.

⁵ <http://www.oecd.org/education/Supporting-the-continuation-of-teaching-and-learning-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/back-to-school-a-framework-for-remote-and-hybrid-learning-amid-covid-19>

⁷ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/press-releases/report-highlights-challenges-facing-schools-and-pupils-in-september-2020/>

⁸ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-in-england-annual-report-2020/>

⁹ <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning/>

⁹ <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-studies-children-young-peoples-views>

¹⁰ <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/>

¹¹ <https://www.teachwire.net/news/survey-of-primary-and-secondary-leaders-suggests-systemic-issues-regarding>

¹² <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-revealed-worries-teachers-are-already-exhausted>

¹³ <http://the-history-girls.blogspot.com/2018/06/bretton-hall-and-yorkshire-sculpture.html>

In parallel to the educational debate on the nature of the curriculum we are all aware that spending too much time in front of screens may result in attention disorders¹⁴, reduce self-confidence and the development of social skills¹⁵. Watching a screen takes children away from play, art, music, physical exercise, that could be available in the home.

The emotional wellbeing of our children is at risk, through hours spent in front of a screen. The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's mental health is self-evident, particularly on those with mental health needs¹⁶.

Screen time, social media and gaming needed further research prior to COVID-19¹⁷, the need for scientific evidence of the impact of increased screen time related to educational practice is self-evident.

We were warned.

In 2007, Future Lab in the Opening Education series paper, *'2020 and beyond Future scenarios for education in the age of new technologies'* advised that the key challenges for education were rooted in the development of new communication tools, in terms of human independence - ethical, spiritual and emotional needs. Place and space were also considered to be a challenge, with the need to consider reorganising institutions, practices, and people in education, including parents and carers. The authors commented on the 'profound disconnect between school practice and research, and between technology and education research'¹⁸.

What next in schools? A move away from screentime?

Now is the time for innovation¹⁹ informed by best practice that embraces all learners, Bruner's Spiral Curriculum²⁰ would be a good starting point –

The spiral approach to curriculum has three key principles that sum up the approach:
Cyclical: Students should return to the same topic several times throughout their school career;
Increasing Depth: Each time a student returns to the topic it should be learned at a deeper level and explore more complexity; **Prior Knowledge:** A student's prior knowledge should be utilized when a topic is returned to so that they build from their foundations rather than starting anew.

¹⁴ <https://drdunckley.com/reset-your-childs-brain/>

¹⁵ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/screenagers-how-not-to-let-tech-destroy-your-children-vgprfdhv0>

¹⁶ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

¹⁷ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)30358-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)30358-7/fulltext)

¹⁸ Future Lab Opening Education *2020 and beyond Future scenarios for education in the age of new technologies'*

¹⁹ <https://oecdeditoday.com/shadows-coronavirus-education-crisis/>

²⁰ <https://helpfulprofessor.com/spiral-curriculum/>

Taking the notion of place and space, the curriculum could be restructured, delivered in sessions, rather than lessons – with less input from teachers, greater engagement in learning by children and their siblings focused on whole-school thematic projects. This would lend itself to whole-year group teaching, and home learning in equal measure.

A modular approach that has been proven in a global study to have positive impact on learning in schools²¹, in universities²² and in the workplace²³. Innovation that has the possibility of distancing children and young people from screens as the notion that online learning is the only available option²⁴, increasing the development of communication and creativity, much needed skills in the future global economy^{25 26}.

More immediately, getting creative in the delivery of the school curriculum and moving away from screens is likely to increase wellbeing and counter the negative impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of a generation of learners.

Comments and ideas welcome.

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The screenshot shows the Achievement for All website homepage. At the top left is the logo. To the right are two buttons: 'Get in touch' (pink) and 'Donate' (dark blue). Below these is a horizontal navigation menu with links: 'About us', 'Coaching Programmes', 'Covid-19 Leadership Support', 'Step-Up Reviews', 'Our Impact', 'News', 'Join us', 'Blog', and 'Awards'. The main content area features a large image of two smiling children. Overlaid on the left side of the image is a text box with the following text: 'We want to put Wellbeing at the heart of learning and help school communities across England and Wales to thrive emotionally, socially and academically, ensuring that social mobility is real.' Below this text box is a pink button that says 'Read our Every Child Included in Education manifesto here'.

Visit afaeducation.org to learn more about our leadership development and professional training approaches that have reached nearly six thousand education settings over nearly a decade.

²¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000263831>

²² <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/learning-and-teaching-strategy/resources/ug-cr/>

²³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anantagarwal/2019/04/25/how-modular-education-is-revolutionizing-the-way-we-learn-and-work/>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54363069>

²⁵ <https://www.communications.gov.au/departmental-news/creative-skills-future-economy>

²⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3846/20294913.2015.1036325>



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