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SCHOOLING ONLINE DURING PERIODS OF DISRUPTION:

USING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE REMOTE LEARNING AND TO KEEP STUDENTS SAFE



INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus crisis has been a reminder to Australians at large that the healthy functioning of schools is of paramount importance to society. Schools are vital to the Australian economy, not only because they allow parents to work, but because they educate the professionals of the future. The full impact of the pandemic is yet to be realised but educators nationwide have had to adapt to teaching their curriculum online. While there have been challenges, Australian communities have rallied together for their schools, with educators, parents and students collaborating to adopt the routines of the classroom successfully into the home.

This white paper will discuss the challenges that online learning has brought to the surface, particularly with technology, and will provide some best practices and tips that have been developed by teachers to engage students learning from home. It will also cover the topics of cybersecurity and cyberbullying, with some insights as to how educators can leverage Windows technologies and vendor support to address these important issues. Additionally, it will spotlight the recent developments from Acer in context of their educational product range, and how these features can enhance the online learning experience.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

If you were to provide a word for the month of March 2020 in the context of education, it would likely be 'scramble'. The COVID-19 pandemic drove a rapid and unexpected shift to remote learning for most Australian students. Educators scrambled to equip their teachers and students with the tools needed for online learning in the face of a pandemic lockdown. In the process, a myriad of challenges surfaced, ranging from availability of hardware and bandwidth, to the adoption of learning software and online communication platforms in which to host classrooms online.

In a rapid response briefing outline sent to the Hon Dan Tehan MP by Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel on May 1st 2020, the following factors were identified as influencing the effectiveness of remote learning:

- access to digital technology and the internet;
- home learning environment and family support;
- teacher and student readiness and capability¹.

While each Australian state adopted a different approach to schooling in the wake of the coronavirus crisis – with some going entirely online with home-schooling programs and others adopting a 'blended approach' – the Federal Minister for Education praised the overall Australian response: "COVID-19 has brought challenges to our education system and I am proud of the way our students, teachers and parents have responded to those challenges," he said in a Q&A session with NewsCorp².

Speaking from the perspective of the technology sector, as well as a parent with three children at school, Rod Bassi of Acer echoes the Education Minister's comment, but also acknowledges the "community effort" that ensued between governments, schools and technology vendors to cater for student online learning needs.

"It was a community effort where heads of schools, the government in their respective jurisdictions, and technology vendors came together – much like a fire – because education is foremost and the potential of writing off an entire year for students, particularly those in delicate years such as prep or year 12, was just not an option," says the Sales Director for the Oceanic Region with Acer.

"This was an event that was surprising and as a nation we were already shell-shocked by the bushfires which took over the summer and that usual holiday period for teachers and students. Then we experienced this COVID-19 bombshell. And if we rewind back to that March time period where everyone was scrambling with online learning, we have to give the educators kudos because by the commencement of term two, they had an adapted form of learning and a functional framework in place."

While Rod recognises it was a "mad scramble for mobility" in that period from mid to late March 2020, he says that the community effort to supply to schools was largely successful.

"Certainly it was key for us to be able to supply a lot of product – and fortunately we have that capability because we assemble our commercial grade products here in Sydney, Australia – and were able to cater to the many requests we had from the public sector for rapid supply of equipment," he explains. "But as I said before it was a real community effort in working together to supply to the schools with what they needed, and the next phase from that was looking at our incumbent contracts and seeing what additional support we could give."



ONLINE LEARNING IN PRACTICE: RESOURCES AND GUIDELINES



The COVID-19 pandemic has made an indelible impact on school communities in Australia, as well as provided educators, parents and students with an invaluable experience that can be harnessed moving forward. While some evidence suggests that educators lack confidence in their ability to adapt teaching methods to a digital environment³, other research reveals that online teaching can be just as effective as conventional classroom teaching when there is access to the right tools and resources⁴. In response to these needs, all Australian state and territory governments have extended online resource help to students, parents and teachers, with plentiful material available. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership has compiled a comprehensive list of these resources in their spotlight guide: *What Works in Online / Distance Teaching and Learning* for ease of access.⁵

From Rod's experience, establishing routines and collaboration – which includes communication from both schools and students – is even more critical with remote learning than it is in the conventional classroom.

“Routine is so important because that's precisely

what students have at schools. Not only for student wellbeing but in ensuring they are engaged – students often learn in spurts, so it's important to factor in their attention span,” he says. “The real measure we are yet to see is how adaptive has the online learning been compared with the experience of studying in school. It's certainly been a two-way street. On the plus side, educators have really lifted their game to deliver their level best to students. The drawback though, has been the access to technology in schools or digital divide, depending on the school or region.”

Notwithstanding, the challenges that teachers face in a physical classroom with classes of 25 students or more, are augmented in a virtual setting when using online mediums to communicate.

“That's where I take my hat off to teachers for their patience, their resilience, and their commitment to staying on course. What I've witnessed has been phenomenal and I've experienced it on a personal level with my three children in years 1, 4 and 6,” says Rod. “It's very tough for educators and students alike, especially with delicate years such as year 12 or preps, where they've got to be nurtured, and they've been thrown into this washing machine scenario.”

TOP TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNING

1. Give very clear instructions. What do the students need to read, watch, write? How much should they write? How do they set it out? Be clear about what you expect to see in their work.
2. Keep passages of text and videos short. Concentration declines very quickly online, particularly with the distractions of social media close at hand.
3. Feedback keeps students engaged and builds a sense of connection. Timeliness is difficult but particularly important. Screen-casting can be very effective for formative feedback. Monash's Digital Education Research team have published a very informative resource about using technology to deliver student feedback⁸.
4. Discussion or forum tasks need responses. This can be from teachers or other classmates – students will generally give up if they feel no one is reading or viewing what they have said.
5. Checklists help students to organise their thinking and their time.
6. Provide scaffolded research tasks. The internet can be overwhelming without guidance. Project based learning provides strong opportunities for differentiation.
7. Build in self-assessment and reflection activities for students.
8. Avoid getting lost in fancy tools. Keep the emphasis on the teaching and learning, not the bells and whistles. There are a lot of amazing resources available and the wheel doesn't need to be reinvented.
9. It can be difficult learning online and it's ok to admit that. Be available to provide support when needed. Remote doesn't have to mean alone.
10. Encourage presentation of work in a variety of formats.

*The above list was compiled by teachers and staff at the Virtual School Victoria and shared on the Victorian Education and Training government website.^{6,7}



CYBERSECURITY AND CYBERBULLYING

With an increased amount of remote learning, the amount of exposure to online harassment and security breaches is also amplified. In an address to educators, Australia's eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, reiterated the need to maintain online safety and help children develop good online habits⁹. In particular, she noted that there was a COVID-19 specific web page and a series of blogs to assist educators and parents during this time¹⁰.

From Rod's point of view, cybersecurity and cyberbullying are both issues that need to remain at the forefront for educators and parents. He also believes that Acer has a role to play in ensuring these topics remain a priority. "Students of this generation are so heavily absorbed by technology and as such there are more opportunities for cyberbullying or security breaches to occur, particularly in a virtual

“Dear principals and teachers, Thank you for all the work you and your colleagues are doing during the COVID-19 pandemic to lessen the anxiety of your whole community. As students enter this new world of online learning, never has online safety been so important.”

Julie Inman Grant, eSafety Commissioner

classroom where it is more difficult for teachers to police what students are viewing,” he elaborates. “E-safety is such an incredibly important subject that could easily be put on the backburner if we're not careful in light of everything going on with COVID-19. I feel it's definitely up to organisations such as Acer and the departments of education to come together and make sure it remains at the forefront.”

LEVERAGING VENDOR SUPPORT

In line with his comments around e-safety, Rod adds that Acer can and does act as a facilitator for educators that they can leverage for support that goes beyond that of hardware supply.

“As a vendor of hardware we have a lot of dialogue with Microsoft in addition to collaborative business reviews where we can bring important topics such as student online safety to the fore,” he says. “We see our role as being that of a facilitator where we can collaborate with software organisations as well as our channelled community to bring solutions to the table. We also provide professional development content to schools to provide guidance on a plethora of subjects and have flagged cyberbullying as a hot topic to invest more effort and resource into.”



ONLINE PROTECTION WITH WINDOWS TECHNOLOGY

- **PARENTAL CONTROLS:** Educators can encourage parents to turn on parental controls to provide online protection. Windows 10 offers these options by default. Once parental controls are enabled, two features are turned on by default. Firstly, internet browsing on Microsoft Edge browser becomes strict, ensuring that no adult content will be displayed in any of the search results. Secondly, InPrivate browsing is blocked, disabling incognito browsing by the child¹¹.
- **WINDOWS IN S MODE:** Educators can advise parents and students about using Windows 10 in S mode. This is a version of Windows 10 that's streamlined for security and performance. For example, it allows only apps from the Microsoft Store, and requires Microsoft Edge for safe browsing¹².
- **ACER PROSHIELD:** This is an all-in-one security solutions software that comes on Acer laptops. It secures the device against unauthorised access and protects local storage. In short, it helps protect students from being hacked and having their personal images or data shared. It uses BIOS settings, data encryption and credential and authentication management to secure devices and prevent intrusion¹³.

NEW FEATURES IN ACER EDUCATION RANGE SUPPORT ONLINE LEARNING

According to Rod, one of the core strengths of the Acer for education range is that much of the product development has come out of feedback provided by Australian schools. This is particularly visible in the Spin 3, Spin 5 and Travelmate laptops, which all have the latest 10th generational intel processors and wifi 6 to provide bandwidth improvements. Other advantages that can help with online learning include the USBC and thunderbolt ports that Acer have incorporated as well as their new garage-able pen – the latter can work for 1.5 hours on just a 15 second fast charge.



“There are lots of advantages with our latest Spin and Travelmate range for education, one which is certainly worth reiterating is that these are designed with spill-resistant features and are military grade tested – a point of difference that most parents will be keen on,” Rod says. “Arguably there is no tougher audience or user base than students and over time we’ve refined our products to be very strong, with a lot of effort put into the hinge design as well as protections for the screens and keyboards.”

For educators interested in a technology consultation with Acer or to learn more about the latest products or vendor support, please email: education.aca@acer.com

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