Rapid evidence assessment
Exemplifying findings from the EEF's rapid evidence
assessment on remote learning – March 2021

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Best evidence on remote learning

The EEF's rapid evidence assessment on remote learning examines the existing research (from 60 systematic reviews and meta-analyses) for approaches that schools could use, or are already using, to support the learning of pupils while schools are partially closed due to Covid-19.

The review suggests when implementing strategies to support pupils' remote learning, or supporting parents to do this, the key things to consider include:

1. Teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered

2. Ensuring access to technology is key, especially for disadvantaged pupils

3. Peer interactions can provide motivation and improve learning outcomes

4. Supporting pupils to work independently can improve learning outcomes

5. Different approaches to remote learning suit different types of content and pupils

Since the publication of the review in April 2020, no new meta-analyses have been published on the topic of remote learning. However, this does not reflect the wide range of new remote and blended learning practices developed by schools across England.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is primarily for school leaders across all phases and school types. It addresses issues that span 'academic' and 'pastoral' matters and celebrates the work of the teaching profession during a time of rapid change.

What does this resource cover?

Here, we set out a number of short case studies from the EEF's Research Schools Network (RSN) which exemplify key findings from the EEF's rapid evidence assessment on remote learning.

These examples aim to capture a broad range of innovative practices developed by schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these strategies were developed or applied during partial school closures in the first national lockdown, in 2020, and may not reflect current school practices which have evolved since then.

The case-studies illustrate approaches rapidly deployed by schools, building on the available evidence. It is important to note many approaches and forms of digital technology could be used to support remote learning, though few have been subject to rigorous impact evaluations.

In all cases, school leaders and teachers are best placed to understand the needs of their pupils and to use their professional judgement to determine and monitor the impact of their remote learning offer.

1. Teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered

The first key finding from the review is to prioritise the quality of teaching. Ensuring elements of effective teaching, for example – clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback – is more important than how or when lessons are provided. The review finds no clear difference between teaching in real time ("synchronous teaching") and alternatives ("asynchronous teaching"). In short, the evidence suggests that 'pedagogy trumps the medium' whether delivered in real time, pre-recorded or a mix of both.

For more discussion on this topic, see this blog from EEF's Content Specialist for Maths and current secondary school teacher, Simon Cox.

HISP Research School: Supporting high-quality 'live' teaching

Steve Smith, Director of HISP Research School, highlights a number of approaches and routines to support high-quality remote teaching and learning. To date, remote learning at Thornden School, a mixed-secondary school in Hampshire, has involved daily online 'live' lessons though the Microsoft Teams platform. Most students at the school have access to computers at home and provision is offered to those who do not. Strategies include:

1. **Planning the lesson** using the home learning planning framework adapted from the EEF's metacognition and self-regulated learning guidance report, available here.

2. **Starting the lesson** with a slide 5 minutes (before lesson starts) setting out information to allow students to organise their workspace and remove distractions such as phones, and to reinforce expectations for use of microphones and the chat function.

3. **Activating prior learning** by starting each lesson with a form of retrieval practice such as a short 5–10-minute quiz through Microsoft Forms. Other strategies include building a slide deck of key images from previous lessons and asking students to elaborate on them by typing into the chat function, reading aloud the responses, making corrections, and addressing any misconceptions.

4. **Linking the lesson objective to previous lessons** by using a slide to exemplify the 'learning journey so far.'

5. **Teaching new concepts** by utilising an electronic graphic board (with use of a laptop and electronic pen) to give 'live worked' examples with a focus on delivering clear, high-quality explanations. Explanations are followed by a learning check (quiz or discussion), and answers are discussed with a set of relevant images.

6. **Assessment** to check deeper understanding is delivered through one or two 'key application' questions per topic, answered 'open book'. Students can send a photo or electronic document of their work via email. This offers an opportunity to discuss the responses during the next lesson. Pupils are asked ahead of time if they're happy to share their work and are assured that this will either help to address a misconception or to highlight a good explanation.

Adapted from *'Reflecting on remote teaching: Exemplifying several strategies'* by Steve Smith, Director of HISP research School. The full blog is available here

Norwich Research School: Strategies for remote formative assessment

Roger Higgins, Director of Norwich Research School and Senior Leader at Notre Dame High School in Norwich, sets out suggestions for remote formative assessment to help check pupils' understanding during live and asynchronous teaching. Aiming to 'strike the right balance between the value and the cost' of using formative assessment, he suggests several approaches including:

For live or "synchronous" teaching	For alternatives or "asynchronous" teaching
Cold calling – asking pupils to unmute after a pause or calling on pupils through the chat function	**Online forms** – using bespoke online forms to capture responses to questions from existing resources e.g. exam papers
Hinge questions – using multiple choice questions using forms or polling tools built into the video call platform	**Online forms** – using forms with auto-feedback built in (this works best with multiple choice questions)
Mini-whiteboards – asking pupils to hold up their answers to their video camera during the lesson	Using existing third-party assessment tools

Adapted from *'The Hidden Lives of Remote Learners'* by Roger Higgins. The full blog is available here.

Many reviews underpinning the EEF's rapid evidence assessment identify a lack of technology as a barrier to successful remote instruction. It is important that support is provided to ensure that disadvantaged pupils – who are more likely to face these barriers – have access to technology.

School and parent surveys conducted by the Sutton Trust at the start of the second national lockdown in 2021 highlight the 'digital divide', with '35% of parents in households with the lowest incomes reporting their children does not have access to a sufficient number of devices, compared with 11% in households with the highest income.' (Sutton Trust 2021). In response to this issue, the Department for Education pledged to deliver more than 1.3 million devices through its online service, alongside a free offer of internet access for disadvantaged pupils if they do not have an internet connection.

### Kyra Research School: Ensuring access to technology

James Siddle, Director of Kyra Research School, and Karen Robinson, Assistant Headteacher of St Margaret's Church of England Primary School in Lincolnshire, outline their approach to ensuring access to technology for all pupils during the first national lockdown in 2020.

The school leaders initially found that whilst most pupils had access to technology, some pupils had no access to a device at all, and others were competing with siblings or parents to gain access. They also experienced issues with setting up families to use a platform such as Google Classroom.

To overcome these barriers to engagement, they used the following approaches:

- One senior member of staff was designated to directly liaise with parents and to set them up on online platforms. This was 'no small task' but was important in boosting the number of pupils accessing remote learning as it enabled school leaders to understand problems and made solutions easier to find.

- For around 11% of families, the lack of access to technology was prohibitive, and the school was able to source iPads to support home learning for these pupils.

- When access to certain platforms dwindled, school staff were careful to adapt their approach and began to use live storytelling sessions with follow up quizzes to improve engagement.

- By the end of the second week of lockdown, the school had around 70% of Key Stage 2 pupils engaged in regular live maths lessons with more accessing a range of work set via Google Classroom. By the end of May 2020, this figure had risen to almost 82% having daily lessons.

- Having supplied the necessary hardware, established Google Classroom and set a regular timetable for online support, the school was able to focus more on the quality of delivery to support.

- The school then moved to the next phase of remote learning, with focus on delivering targeted online interventions for small groups.

Adapted from *'Teacher Quality and Subject Focus through Remote Learning'* by James Siddle and Karen Robinson. The full blog is available here.
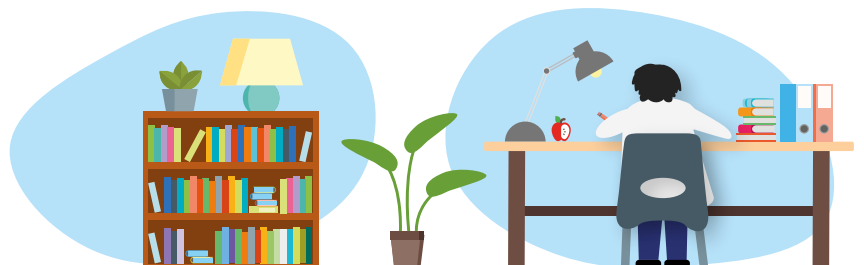
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Several reviews highlight the importance of peer interaction during remote learning, as a way to motivate pupils and improve outcomes. The value of collaborative approaches was emphasised in many reviews, although notably many studies involved older learners. The review suggests that different approaches to peer interaction are likely to be better suited to different age groups.

Rosendale primary school: promoting peer interaction

Kate Atkins, Headteacher of Rosendale Primary School in West Dulwich, sets out a number of approaches used by teachers to promote peer interaction, with the aim of bringing strategies used in the classroom into remote learning.

In the Early Years, this included:

- Small group, live lessons to mirror the Kagan cooperative learning approach at Rosendale. These small group sessions use a "Round Robin" structure to offer opportunities for oral rehearsal with particular language structures ("If I were an animal, I would be a… because…") or counting skills.

- When practising number skills in live lessons, teachers calling out a number and asking the children to show that number by balancing on different numbers of points on the floor – for example, 1 elbow and 2 knees if the teacher calls out the number 3.

- Setting up a Live Lego Play Session so children can play together side by side. Some pupils told each other about their construction, while others chose to play quietly.

- Teachers sharing photos of children's home learning activities with the aim of replicating the interactive, idea exchanging environment of free play.

In Key Stages 1 and 2, approaches included:

- Teachers posing questions in their morning whole-class message and asking pupils to find the answer in time to explain during live lessons.

- Teachers using examples of pupils' work to support others to verbalise their metacognitive thinking – for example, sharing how a pupil has used language successfully in a piece of writing.

- During live teaching, teachers using Kagan structures "Take Off Touch Down" and "Find the Fiction" – for example, a teacher would say "Take off if you have a dog" and pupils could see who else is a dog owner.

- Teachers taking their year group on a virtual school trip to Antarctica which included a memory game, a pre-flight quiz to gain a visa and a scavenger hunt. This was used to support pupils' writing.

For all pupils, providing high quality instant feedback was essential. The school has utilised "Seesaw", a digital platform where teachers can post work and pupils can submit their responses, such as a piece of writing, a maths solution or a video or voice recording. Teachers then provide feedback on that work. In Early Years, teachers use audio comments on the pupils' work and have also sent out achievement certificates to boost motivation. Every piece of work submitted has received feedback and over 10,000 pieces of work have been posted each week. Teachers can also utilise the platform to post announcements for the whole class to see and comment on.

Meols Cop Research School: Providing opportunities for remote peer interaction

Beth Kearns, Head of Mathematics at Meols Cop High School in Southport, has considered ways of supporting peer interaction during live remote teaching. One effective way of achieving this has been using online 'mini whiteboard' software. Pupils are used to using whiteboards as a method of in-class formative assessment, and the online equivalent allows the teacher to view all pupils' responses individually while individual pupils can only see their own response. Due to an established positive and supportive classroom environment, the teacher can then share individual pupil responses as examples of particularly good reasoning or working with the whole class.

In addition, when pupils are working outside of a 'live' lesson, they use online questions which can be monitored by the teacher in real time. If it is clear that a small group of pupils need additional support, they are prompted by the teacher to join a small group live session in which the teacher can offer additional support and the pupils can ask questions of the teacher and each other in a supportive environment away from the main class.

Multiple reviews identified the value of strategies that help pupils work independently with success. Wider evidence related to metacognition and self-regulation suggests that disadvantaged pupils are likely to particularly benefit from explicit support to help them work independently, for example, by providing checklists or daily plans.

Supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to work independently is particularly important. Findings from the Sutton Trust's 2021 school and parent surveys suggest that 'schools with a higher intake of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds may receive limited parental support for learning at home compared to pupils in more affluent schools.' (Sutton Trust, 2021).

For further discussion on how schools can support their pupils to develop effective routines and learning habits during partial school closures, see this blog by the EEF's Content Specialist for Learning Behaviours and current secondary school SENCo, Kirsten Mould.

The Greetland Academy: Supporting pupils to work independently

Helen Crowther, Principal of the Greetland Academy, a primary school in Halifax, outlines their whole school strategy for supporting independent learning, with an emphasis on metacognition and the 'Plan B' approach.

Key challenges:

- During March 2020 to the end of the summer term 2020, whilst 92% of pupils were successfully using the chosen learning platform, younger children and pupils with SEND were reliant on parental support in order to do so. Teachers raised concerned about the potential risk of these pupils losing independence.

- In September 2020, staff wanted to make sure that any future remote learning addressed this issue and supported pupils to plan and monitor their own learning as much as possible.

Approaches to supporting independent learning included:

1. **Teacher modelling:** Asynchronous recordings with clear teacher modelling of strategies related to the learning were used. This allowed for multiple viewings, which in turn helped pupils to manage cognitive load where the content or the strategy was new.

2. **Activating prior learning:** Teachers delivered live input at the start of each day in which they contextualised the learning and supported the activation of prior knowledge.

3. **Promoting metacognition:** Teachers built on the metacognitive strategies used in face-to-face teaching. It was particularly important to reinforce monitoring strategies that pupils could employ when they found work challenging. The school promoted the use of the 'Plan B' strategy when pupils got stuck, which stands for 'Brain, Books/ Board and Boss.'

- **Brain:** Pupils were encouraged to consider *'What do I already know about this? Have I done anything like this before?'* The learning platform enables children to review their previous work (and to look back at teaching videos and resources to scaffold their learning) in the same way that in class, children look back at the work in their books to support their learning. For example – in English, work across the week builds up to a written outcome and may feature prior work on improving vocabulary. The children can then look back at this later in the week to use to support their writing.

- **Books/board:** Pupils were encouraged to consider *'What scaffolds/strategies do I have to help me do this?'* In the classroom, this refers to the prompts and "aid memoires" on the working wall alongside the concrete resources (such as word mats for English or tens frame in maths) that the children can use to support their learning.

Online provision mirrors this, with children being given access to resources that can scaffold their learning, such as a place value grid in maths.

- Finally, **Boss:** *'I need to ask for help, what am I finding hard?'* Two-way feedback between the teacher and child was facilitated through the remote education offer. For example, writing conferences, which the school carried out with children to support the redrafting process within the writing cycle, continued throughout the lockdown period.

- Through the "Seesaw" digital platform, children could message their teacher for support who would then provide feedback in written, audio and video format. Feedback was recorded, and written feedback acknowledged the process of learning, as well as the product.

Views from the Research Schools Network: Supporting pupils with SEND to form good habits and study routines

Kirsten Mould, the EEF's Content Specialist for Learning Behaviours and current SENCo, sets out an overview of a discussion with SENCos from the Research Schools Network during the first national lockdown in 2020. The purpose of the meeting was to share the recent EEF guidance report, Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, and to exemplify practice across different school types and phases, with the aim of amplifying voices from the classroom.

The group discussed ways they were supporting pupils with SEND in line with the best available evidence on remote learning. With emphasis on local context and professional judgement, and based on knowledge of families and pupil voice, the group discussed two key questions, summarised below:

1. **How can we support our pupils to form new, positive habits at home?**

   To support forming good habits, we want to help our pupils and their families to plan and protect regular times for home learning. Having one place in the house where there is space and basic equipment to learn and removing distractions were explicitly encouraged through lesson introductions.

   Teaching assistants (TAs) took on the role of link adult in many schools. They provided a central point of contact to answer learning questions and encourage routines at home. At the start of the first national lockdown, we used scripts to support conversations on habits with action on delivering equipment to homes as required.

2. **How can we help pupils create a study routine?**

   We know that identifying a specific and regular time to start work is helpful. Agreeing a way to show/share work when it is done – with a parent or uploaded to their teacher – is also a good routine. Some pupils needed more support with this than others, including some pupils with SEND. Sharing checklists, setting up scripted conversations, modelling with short videos and email buddy systems, helped to scaffold and model these routines. TA teams sent out packages of quarantined reading books and led one-to-one reading with EAL pupils and those with SEND to ensure reading remained a priority in routines at home. Weekly check-ins with teachers and TAs and daily tutor time has shown increased engagement in learning and increased submission of work. We can also know that our pupils are well and safe.

Adapted from EEF blogs by Kirsten Mould: *'New Year, new lockdown – a renewed challenge'* and *'Three crucial questions for schools wanting to support the impact of teaching assistants'*.

Finally, the remote learning rapid evidence assessment suggests that approaches vary widely and have different strengths and weaknesses. It recommends support for teachers to consider which approaches are best suited to the content they are teaching and the age of their pupils.

Reflecting on this recommendation during the first national lockdown in 2020, Dr Caroline Creaby, Director of Sandringham Research School in Hertfordshire, commented:

'Although this recommendation may appear obvious on the surface, it shouldn't be overlooked. In my discussions with many teachers over the past few weeks, the needs of their curriculum and what that means to pedagogy are very different.

'For the Philosophy and Religion teacher who sees her Key Stage 3 classes once a week, recaps and quizzing are particularly important, whereas for the A-level Media teacher who has just started coursework with his Year 12 students, personalised feedback is more critical.

'Levels of recap, explanation and feedback for each subject and key stage are therefore likely to vary in order to provide students with the most effective support. As the evidence review reminds us, our professional judgement is important when considering our respective approaches.'

Extracted from *'Distance learning: Reflections on the EEF's rapid evidence review'* by Dr Caroline Creaby. The blog is available in full here.

The evidence in the remote learning evidence review is drawn from diverse contexts that do not closely parallel the circumstances facing schools responding to Covid-19 in 2020–21. The case studies provided are intended to illustrate how schools have used professional judgement and knowledge of their school communities to develop their remote learning provision in-line with best available evidence. It is acknowledged that schools are still reflecting on their approaches.

Launched in 2016, the EEF's Research Schools Network is made up of 37 schools: 27 Research Schools and 10 Associate Research Schools. The network aims to lead the way in the use of evidence-based teaching, and support schools in their region through regular communications, events, training, and professional development. You can find out more information and search for your nearest Research School here.

Further reading

EEF blog – Live teaching and pre-recorded video lessons – what does the evidence say? – Simon Cox

EEF blog – New Year, New Lockdown – A Renewed Challenge – Kirsten Mould

EEF blog – Making remote learning activities meaningful: Talk with Trust/ 7 tips to support reading at home – Caroline Bilton

EEF blog – Learning in lockdown: How to help your students 'have a go' – Simon Cox

Voices from the Classroom – Remote Learning – Emma Weston

Evidence into Action – Managing behaviour and building habits – Alex Quigley, Kirsten Mould, Harry Fletch-Wood & Jenny Thompson

Resources

The EEF Guide to Supporting School Planning: A Tiered Approach to 2021

EEF website – COVID-19 Resources: Support Resources Schools and Parents

Department for Education guidance – Get Help with Remote Education

References

Montacute and Cullinane (2021). Learning in Lockdown: Research Brief. Sutton Trust, London. Available here: https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/learning-in-lockdown/