UNMOTIVATED, DISENGAGED AND FALLING BEHIND:
HOW VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS HELP REACH RELUCTANT STUDENTS

Sam Warnes, a former teacher and founder of EDLounge, explains how online learning and virtual classrooms can re-energise even the most reluctant learners...

Unfortunately, many children are unmotivated to engage with their learning and often this leads to more serious repercussions if they are left without support. One way to encourage deeper learning is to introduce self-reflective assessment and peer reviews.

What the numbers say

Many children express a disinterest – or even hatred – for school. As many as 10.5 per cent of students across primary, secondary, state and independent schools were classified as persistent absentees in the 2015/2016 academic year. Without access to the curriculum, these students are inevitably going to fall behind and enter a cycle of poor attainment and further disengagement with school.

Even if we give them a chance to try again, the root of the problem may not have been solved. This is demonstrated by figures from the Department for Education, which showed 77.3 per cent of students in England do not attain a C grade in English or maths when they resit the exam post-16. When so many jobs require these skills, we need to find alternative solutions to ensure our students are not limited in their options.

We need to understand the crux of the problem and identify what has caused them to disengage with their learning in the first place if we are to support students with poor attendance, behaviour and/or attainment. Perhaps the work is too difficult, or too easy, or just isn't presented to them in a way that meets their learning style. Another factor to consider is whether they have a special educational need or disability (SEND), as according to IPSEA (Independent Parental Special Education Advice), children with SEND are far more likely to be excluded from school than their classmates.

Not all students that skip school or disrupt lessons are 'bad kids', it's simply that some students are unsuited to a mainstream learning environment, leaving them disengaged, jeopardising their chances of attainment and ultimately making it more likely that they avoid school if it's something they associated as being something they're not good at. However, every school has a behaviour policy and if a student fails to abide by this, regardless of the underlying cause, they may be suspended or excluded. It's then the responsibility of the school to facilitate work for the first five school days, and arrange an alternative place suitable for full-time education, such as inclusion centres or Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), from the sixth school day onwards.

For some students, the mainstream environment will never work for them full time and then they risk bouncing back-and-forth between the classroom and the inclusion centre, leaving students with little chance of settling and therefore likely to impact their attainment levels too.

Self-reflective assessment and peer review

As well as freeing up time for teachers by creating less marking, encouraging students to review each other's work or to reflect on their own work reinforces what they have learnt and empowers students to take responsibility. EDLounge user surveys found that 82 per cent of those interviewed felt that peer review helped their writing skills and 92 per cent said reviewing the work of peers generally benefitted their own education experience.

An online learning environment creates an open but safe space for students and teachers to collaborate, making full use of peer review, self-assessment and traditional assessment techniques, depending on the suitability for each student. They allow an individual learning pathway to be formed so that when teachers recognise a

student's strength or weakness, they can hone in on that to work with them to support their goals.

A teacher could deliver his or her lesson online via a virtual classroom, livestreaming to their pupils at a time convenient to them. With one lesson scheduled for the morning and one in the afternoon, students can use the time in between to reflect on their assignments, before discussing with their peers in the afternoon session to receive feedback from both peers and teachers. Alternatively, online platforms often offer a discussion forum so this assessment and collaboration technique is a continuous process.

With technology shaping so many areas of our lives today, it makes sense to take advantage of online learning platforms, because they provide students with a sense of familiarity; they are acquainted with the methods, requirements and content being used, which makes learning remotely feel less overwhelming and isolating. By incorporating self-reflective assessment and peer reviews, students can still feel part of the community.

A personalised pathway

Virtual classrooms give structure and guidance to students in an environment outside of the mainstream classroom, supporting reluctant students to re-engage with their learning in a way that is suited to them. Students and staff can access the network from home and even link timetables, so homework can be set for specific individuals or classes.

For students that may be, unfortunately, disengaged in the classroom, and consequently be at home, in inclusion, or excluded, an online learning platform can be used to create a personalised pathway to better behaviour, assessment or attainment. This ensures students who are in isolation are still able to access lessons, guidance and support from their teachers, so that when they're reintroduced back into the classroom, they've not fallen behind their peers.

Student progress is continuously monitored by the school during their time outside of the classroom, and schools can contact parents at any time and update them on their child's efforts, which also makes the reintroduction to the school environment seamless and as stress-free as possible.

Online learning platforms also offer students courses that seek to help students to understand and modify bad behaviour. Then, if a student refuses to participate in peer review work or assignments, it means they have to go back into isolation on their return to school. Consequently, more often than not, schools report that the percentage of students completing this work is very high, as they see it as a preferred alternative to isolation.

In situations where teachers are struggling to engage students with their learning, or when students are having difficulty accessing the education provided in the classroom, online learning platforms and virtual classrooms provide more flexibility, which can support learning long-term, rather than risk students falling behind while in an inclusion centre. What's more, the benefits of self-reflective assessment and peer review can be supported on these platforms to maintain social interaction and boost engagement with learning.

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