



**Teachers in Northern Ireland Discuss Remote Learning:  
Challenges, Opportunities and Resources**

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The following exchange comes from practicing teachers in Northern Ireland participating in a Masters Degree programme. Here they are discussing the challenges of remote learning during lockdown. Contributions are anonymised here, but if readers are interested in following up any of the details, please contact WeLearn at [info@welearnni.com](mailto:info@welearnni.com) and we will pass your queries on to contributors.

**Contributor A:**

Constructive Tips (and Challenges) for Remote Learning...

Well, if there was ever a time to collect data on how a Virtual Learning environment can be used now is the time - get those dissertation titles ready folks!

On a more serious note, it is amazing to watch how those in the education system come together to support one another and create resources at such short notice. Currently, I am answering the same questions about Google Classroom for maybe the fifth time even though we have included a document and a video on where to find resources. I have been using the power of social media to share various science experiments with parents of primary school children and those in KS3 as these concepts can be difficult to comprehend at home. They simply include a step by step guide and the equipment you will need (you will be happy to hear toilet roll is not being used as it has become a luxury item during this time). I would be happy to share these with any of you who may want to include something a little different to your own online platforms for your classes.

I am struggling a little with the idea that I cannot personally assist those children in my class who have additional learning needs. I do not want to create a separate Google Classroom for them as this will isolate them and I do not want to write on the overall classroom that certain children should complete certain questions/activities. I have simply placed a starter activity into the work I would like all of the children to complete and set a timeframe knowing that those with additional needs in my class may not get any further than the basic knowledge questions and some understanding and application questions. However, this means I may receive work from other students who are striving for quantity over quality. How are you addressing this issue in your own classes?

**Contributor B:**

Thanks very much for getting the ball rolling, A. Yes -- special needs becomes an even more difficult issue. As with many things in education, the current situation is drawing attention to the inherent strengths and weaknesses of what we have continued to do all along. I hope we come out of this wiser and with a willingness to change our assumptions and structures. For example, as you suggest, does it highlight the potential value of self-differentiating tasks (see an American article on that here ([Link to an external site.](#)))? I'd be interested in people's thoughts on this.

**Contributor C:**

Hi A,

In our primary school we struggled with differentiation also as we didn't want to highlight groups within the classes. We have used our website to upload work and have sent home differentiated packs.

As a parent of 3 children all in secondary school I am shocked at the amount of work posted. My youngest child is year 8 and I feel by the end of this I will be an expert in some subjects. Last week I was teaching myself about distillation as I needed to understand it before I could teach my daughter!! Maybe I will text you the next time I'm stuck, A!!

Then there are the fights over the laptop. My Masters work could be hand written if I don't put my foot down!!

Take care everyone during these uncertain times.

**Contributor D:**

Hi all,

Some interesting points regarding differentiation we've had similar issues in our primary school. We are using a range of apps from Purple Mash, Mathletics, Seesaw and Bug Vlub. I haven't used Google Classroom or had much experience with it ... wondering if it would be beneficial to promote in a primary school setting?

Recent weeks have been hectic for schools having to organise staff training, homework packs and keep parents up to date simultaneously. Hopefully after teething problems are ironed out things will begin to run more smoothly over the next week or two. I agree with A, now would probably be an interesting time to explore and collect data on virtual learning! Take care all and good luck with virtual teaching!

**Contributor E:**

An interesting article on self-differentiation, B. Thank you for sharing. I think providing pupils with a range of tasks and giving them the opportunity to select ones which are appropriate to their ability sounds great in theory. It is certainly more practical and time efficient than creating different tasks to suit the learning needs of each individual pupil. (The pace at which we were creating home learning packs recently did not allow for any differentiation at all unfortunately!)

I think the effectiveness of self-differentiation though depends a lot on the individual nature of the pupils we teach. Some members of my class would feel motivated by the challenge of harder activities offered particularly in a subject they liked. While others would feel demotivated by having to choose 'easier' tasks and I would be concerned about the impact

it could have on their self-esteem. Others would simply always choose the easy option even if they are capable of more of a challenge!

I think it definitely has value and is something I could use more of. However, I will also and bear in mind the possible implications it could have for the different personalities I teach.

**Contributor F:**

Hi everyone.

Many thanks for the article on self-differentiation. I am teaching P5 this year and work in a school where Seesaw has been a huge part of school life for a few years now. We sent home learning packs for pupils but as the majority of parents are on board with Seesaw, we are putting out daily tasks on that which can be completed online or via the learning packs. We have tentatively gone down the road of self-differentiation. For example, some daily maths challenges have been put out to KS2 as a whole via Seesaw however they are colour banded depending on level. We have given an indication of brown being for P5 level however if a child finds that too taxing they can move to a level of their choice and likewise challenge themselves by trying a more advanced option. Obviously this comes with its own set of issues for the child in the classroom who always chooses the 'easy' option, but hopefully with parents on board and overseeing the work, they will guide the child and push them where appropriate. It is a useful method in terms of SEN as it allows children and parents to choose an activity at their level without bluntly naming children and saying, "You must complete such and such a task" -- which could highlight a learning need, etc. Plus, the generalised-yet-differentiated work allows for a bulk set of work to be sent out rather than having to allocate work to 30 children individually. All we can hope is parents are sensible and realistic with it!

There are huge differences in terms of online learning between schools. As I say, my own school has always been proactive and forward thinking regarding VLEs, whereas 3 of my 4 children are in a primary school where online learning has never been used and just today we received login codes via text for the Class Dojo app -- while each child received a comprehensive hard copy learning pack to work on at home. I am interested to see how their quick introduction to online learning will work and function.

These last few days have been a learning curve but hopefully it will upskill us in ways we could never have imagined as a workforce!

**Contributor A:**

Thank you for uploading the article, B. Many teachers have decided to employ the 'traffic light' system. However, I have decided to avoid this method as the colours have other connotations associated with them. Why would any child want to enter the red zone? It screams danger and 'NO' in my eyes. A heat map approach eliminates that and allows children to work through it independently.

E, I have to agree with you -- some students will take the set differentiation as 'I can do the bare minimum here.' Others will strive for higher-order thinking and questions and may feel a little disheartened if they do not get them correct.

C, I feel for some of the parents of children in post-primary schools because I don't think subjects are looking at the work they are designating and thinking about the time children have to access it. We usually timetable maths for seven 35 minute periods a week and science for four 35 minute periods. Now some parents are contacting me saying a subject that is timetabled for only two 35 minute periods is giving more work than science -- which

was timetabled for four! I have told my pupils, 'Do what you can,' and we can't ask any more than that. We are all going to be picking up pieces in September for all children of all abilities because this is not an ideal platform in my opinion.

Another problem that seems to be coming to the fore is how important expression is in our language. When I am typing a message to a pupil, I am thinking to myself, 'I hope they don't think I am being rude or taking this the wrong way.' I miss having the human interaction and allowing body language, facial expression and tone assist in the learning – Clifford Geertz's 'thick description' is needed! I miss my classroom.

**Contributor G:**

An interesting article, B. Thank you for showing us this. I do agree that it can be an overwhelming workload. Also, it is difficult to let go of control as there are so many children in the class with so many different needs. However, I do think that it is good to give the children autonomy over their work too.

There is no explicit set of instructions for this pandemic for everyone -- regardless of whether you work in a school, in a nursing home or in a shop, so it is very uncertain for everyone. I am sure everyone else is thinking the same and would far rather be in school right now, but it is out of our control. I think you have to choose a method that is the best fit for you and your colleagues. I work in the same school as F, but I am in KS1 so we have provided the children with different tasks via Seesaw.

In KS1 we have given the children a suggested timetable as to what they should be doing and when they should be doing it, hoping that it is helpful to parents. We also understand that parents are still working/caring for other family members and are out of their routine at this time, so it is not compulsory for all of them. They should do what works for them. All the teachers in my KS agreed to give the children one page of literacy and one of numeracy per day (nothing new to them, just something to consolidate their learning) and then a home bingo-like style sheet for them to choose an activity from, whether that is tidying their room or baking a cake -- something enjoyable for them to do as this is all very new to everyone but it is not forever. It is difficult to help those with additional needs, but I think they all need to pace themselves, parents included and complete the work with whatever methods suit them at this moment.

It does lead us to question how effectively are we working from home and how are the parents finding our approach. In the future I do think online learning will be more prominent but I think that in primary schools we will not use as much of this as maybe secondary schools or universities will. Here is a short clip on the [flipped classroom and blended learning](#) that we may see more of in these educational settings in the future.

**Contributor B:**

Amidst all the difficulties, I can sympathise with the phrase, 'I miss my classroom.' I hope we'll all be back there before too long....but having learned what from this all?

**Contributor D:**

I agree with G. It can be a stressful time with parents having to home-school their children while trying to work simultaneously and therefore developing life skills is an excellent idea. Allowing children to learn how to cook, get more active, read for leisure, create artwork, etc. is great for holistic development and I would strongly encourage the parents in my school to promote this! I think we will probably see far greater emphasis and promotion of

online learning and developing greater communication between parents after all this is over, which I don't think is a bad thing! It will have also implications, no doubt, for how we prepare, plan and teach. I hope this will be in a positive way, for example, cutting down workload or planning time.

**Contributor H:**

It's nice to hear that other teachers are in similar situations to the one we are finding ourselves in in our school. While we also have access to Bug Club, Mathletics and ClassDojo to set digital tasks, we are a week into this process and are finding it difficult to engage with all pupils.

Some pupils have not yet responded or submitted virtual learning tasks to date for a variety of reasons. Some due to lack of access to computers / tablets or, as previously mentioned, because there may be an attitude creeping in about 'not having to do it because I am not in school.'

I teach in a primary school so ultimately I feel it is still parental responsibility to ensure work is being completed, but that leads into a whole other discussion about parental support and how it is as important as ever during this crisis!

**Contributor I:**

Hi everyone, bit late to this discussion but I've spent the last two weeks trying to remotely train and work with staff on the use of Google Classroom and also register the pupils from classes in our school who weren't already registered. We're getting there bit by bit.

If you are using Google Classroom then differentiation can be quite straight forward. When you submit 'classwork' there is a small drop down menu beside the STUDENTS menu. This allows you to assign work solely to the targeted students. So for example, I am using a combination of Google Forms for multiple choice questions, and uploading a picture and audio file of simple Irish Medium comprehensions. When I post this work I can select which pupils see which comprehension and so am able to continue to work to the same groupings which I had in class. The addition of an audio file also supports the additional needs learner. I'm not sure if this is of any help to anyone but it is a very useful tool.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

**Contributor I:**

(If this is obvious and already known to most people, then I apologise in advance.)

If you are using Windows 10, the built-in SNIPPING TOOL is invaluable and has been my 'best friend' for a few weeks now. It simply takes a snapshot of your screen at any time (similar to PRNT SCRN) but allows you to annotate, edit, highlight and change the image before sharing to the online platform. You can access it by simply typing SNIPPING TOOL into the 'Type here to search' box on the bottom left corner of your screen. Once you open it, click on NEW and highlight the image required. Then save the snipped image to your files. It really is a great little app for the laptop or desktop.

**Contributor A:**

Contributor I, this is really helpful as we have had parents and guardians of our weaker children worried that their children feel they cannot complete the work. Would you mind if I shared this with my colleagues?

**Contributor I:**

Share away, of course, A. If there are any other ways you want to try using Classroom or general tips then feel free to ask me through here.

**Contributor J:**

I hope everyone is keeping well and staying safe! It has been very interesting and valuable to get an insight into what other schools and teachers are doing to address the situation we have found ourselves in -- thank you for sharing!

In my school, from Nursery to Primary 7, all teachers have signed up to Class Dojo as the main form of communication with parents and students. Initially, we had discussed using different apps for different key stages, e.g. Google Classroom for KS2, Seesaw for KS1, but it was decided to use the same app throughout the school to ensure consistency. So far, about 80% of parents have connected to Class Dojo. Through the app, parents and pupils are informed about activities and work available for the week and links to activities on Study Ladder, Bug Club, Mathletics, Purple Mash and Accelerated Reader. As we enter into our third week of digital learning, I can see that parents, pupils and I are becoming familiar with the new modes of teaching, learning and communicating. I encourage my students to upload work that they have completed at home onto Class Dojo. I also use Class Dojo to inform parents and pupils of other useful website/activities including Topmarks, BBC Bitesize and Twinkl.

As a school we are also using the school's Facebook page to inform parents of other useful activities and tasks that their child can participate in at home. Please feel free to share with your school if you are not familiar with any of them already.

1. BBC Teach Live Lessons for primary schools
2. RTE broadcasting 'School on TV' - 11-12pm Monday to Friday on RTE 2.
3. Try Google animals. For example, type 'what size is a wolf?' into your google search bar. Click on 'view in 3D' under 'Meet a life-sized wolf up close'. You will be able to see the wolf on your camera app. A fun activity to do with your children.
4. The Burnavon Theatre. The Burnavon Theatre are providing a weekly timetable of events and tutorials covering arts and crafts, music and entertainment. Check out their Facebook page.
5. Free celebrity classes for kids in lockdown:
  - 9am: [PE with Joe Wicks](#)
  - 10am: [Music with Myleene Klass](#)
  - 11am: [Science with Maddie Moate](#)
  - 11:30pm: [Dance with Oti Mabuse](#)
  - 1.00pm: [Maths with Carol Vorderman](#)
  - 2.00pm: [History with Dan Snow](#)
  - 3.00pm: [English with David Walliams](#)
  - 5.00pm: [Food tech with Jamie Oliver](#)
6. NCSE: [National Council for Special Education](#). The NCSE are providing online resource on their website for children with Special Educational Needs who are at home as a result of the schools' closure.
7. [Autism NI](#) -- providing useful resources including social stories that may help your child understand the main points of our current situation.

8. [Fitter For Change: AB Coaching for Life and Sport](#) -- You can register for free to VIP Classroom for home coaching videos. These videos are aimed at supporting parents/guardians and children with physical education during this period of time at home.
9. [Collins 'Big Cat' E-Books Free](#). These are especially beneficial for younger readers p1-p3 who do not have access to Accelerated Reading. There are also lots of free worksheets on it which are linked to the reading books. Special Parents Login: parents@harpercollins.co.uk Password: Parents20! This can be accessed in the Primary Section under Teacher Sign In.
10. [Harry Potter at Home](#) -- J.K. Rowling and her Wizarding World partners have launched 'Harry Potter at Home' -- a hub of information and activities for parents, children and carers to discover the magic of Harry Potter from the comfort of your own homes.  
[www.jkrowling.com](http://www.jkrowling.com)
11. [Amazon Audible](#) -- Amazon have cancelled the subscription of books and audio stories for children and students of all ages. All stories are free to stream on your desktop, laptop, phone or tablet using the link <https://stories.audible.com/start-listen>
12. [LibrariesNI](#): You can keep your children reading with Libraries NI eBook service. If you're already a member you just need your membership number. If you're not a member, you can sign up on their website.
- 13: [Twinkl Phonics Suite](#). KS1 children can work on their phonics.
- 14: [The Maths Factor](#) -- Let Carol Vorderman teach your child Maths for Free!
- 15: [Premier League Primary Stars](#) -- Children can complete fun maths football games.
16. Story: ['Dave the Dog is worried about Coronavirus'](#). This story was created by a nurse, Molly Watts, and is designed to help ease children's fears about the coronavirus.

**Contributor I:**

A fantastic list of resources, J. I have seen and been bombarded with links, apps, free sign-ins etc. to all sorts of materials but your list is the first I've seen laid out in a clear manner. Regarding ClassDojo, do pupils require their own login details and credentials or do they simply click on a link to access the class?  
Cheers.

**Contributor F:**

I agree with you here, I. My inbox was full of all sorts of providers sending through online access to learning/educational webpages etc., to the point it was overwhelming, but this is a straightforward and comprehensive list. I have to say, in all the things I have been sent, it is hard at times to identify those of good quality as opposed to those which people have created in 5 minutes to become relevant or 'get in on the online action!'

**Contributor K:**

I think in terms of the self-differentiation my experience is slightly different to that of classroom teachers. A key part of my job is meeting individual need within a small group setting so I always say I'm more fortunate than most class teachers because I get the opportunity to see areas where individual children are struggling and I have the space to offer more focused support. In saying that I agree that self-differentiation has a lot of challenges: self-motivation to identify the appropriate level (do children even have the skills to do this or know that they are pushing themselves?) and awareness of the different levels of work being set. One thing I do come across a lot particularly with the children regarded as underachieving is an extreme lack of confidence. Quite often this is concealed as a lack

of focus. They always seem to be the children concerned with what the other children are doing, so I can only imagine the impact this would have on already dented confidence levels. I suppose within the home setting the self-differentiation success could be largely impacted by parental involvement as much as pupil motivation. This does seem like an interesting time to be able to carry out research though -- unique times we're living in!! Take care everyone, and stay safe!

**Contributor I:**

Interesting you mentioned working with individual pupils because our support teacher is feeling somewhat powerless to get her support out to her targeted pupils. She's torn between posting generic activities to our school website which could cater for a significant portion of her pupils and going as far as to ring the families individually to talk through ways to continue working. I suppose it is like the majority of her work where each pupil will probably need supported in their own unique way!  
It's a tricky one!

**Contributor A:**

I have to agree with you on the point of confidence. I have individually contacted students in my form class through phone calls to check in on their progress. I also teach my form class Maths and Science and some of the pupils who struggle in these areas are making comments such as 'I didn't want to try it and get it wrong' or 'I didn't want to ask a question on the Google Classroom for everybody to see' or 'That question looked really difficult and I didn't think I would be able to answer it.' This is heart breaking as a teacher because when you can identify this in your classroom you can give them the confidence boost they need and guide them along the way. Then, their sense of achievement becomes palpable. I have set up an individual conversation with each one of my form class on our form google classroom which is private so if they feel they need to ask any questions and do not wish to do so in front of their peers, they can. However, the problem with being a post-primary teacher is I am unsure if all other teachers are doing this and I couldn't do it for over 200 pupils that I teach. That only covers them for Maths and Science and not their other subjects.

**Contributor L:**

I hope everyone is safe and well  
I have mentioned before that I am a primary one teacher and have experienced all of the worries about differentiation. As my class includes 9 children who have English as an additional language, I am very concerned about how their learning is progressing during these very unusual times. As a school we provided hard copies of their work for the first two weeks and have also set up Google Classroom to initially allow the children to have a connection with their classmates and with me in the Google Classroom stream. I have posted videos of myself, the school has purchased [myON](#) which is a large online library for children, and I have also suggested that the children in my class make an account with Oxford Owl to continue their reading. We have also posted literacy, numeracy and WAU tasks for the week. The school have contacted all of the families suggesting that, in this difficult time, it might be nice for the children to communicate with each other and with their teachers. They have also been informed that all school work is available on Google Classroom. To date I have had three children from a class of 26 login in!! My colleagues

from other year groups have had much more interaction with the children and they have reported that the majority of their classes have enjoyed the lessons and the ability to connect with their teachers and classmates. So, as the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink!! I feel that the implications of Covid-19 over the coming years in educational terms could have positives. As teachers, we all discuss the benefits of having the parents on board in normal circumstances. This is the case now more than ever. I am very worried that the longer my young learners are away from school, the greater the implications for their future learning.  
Stay safe everyone

**Contributor F:**

Hi L,

I know you had mentioned Oxford Owl which is a fab resource, and I've been using it with my own children since lockdown, but (you may already know this) Amazon have the Oxford Reading Tree books online in their Kindle section for free. This may be of use to some of your parents if they are using Oxford Owl. Just thought I'd mention it, although you probably already know this with the plethora of offer emails doing the rounds to all teachers at the moment!

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- 1. Go on to Twitter using the hashtag [#welearnremotelearning](#) .***
- 2. You can also email us here at WeLearn ([info@welearnni.com](mailto:info@welearnni.com) ) to ask for further details on any of the issues or resources mentioned above.***
- 3. Lastly, you can contact us at WeLearn with an idea for an article or a contribution of your own: [info@welearnni.com](mailto:info@welearnni.com)***