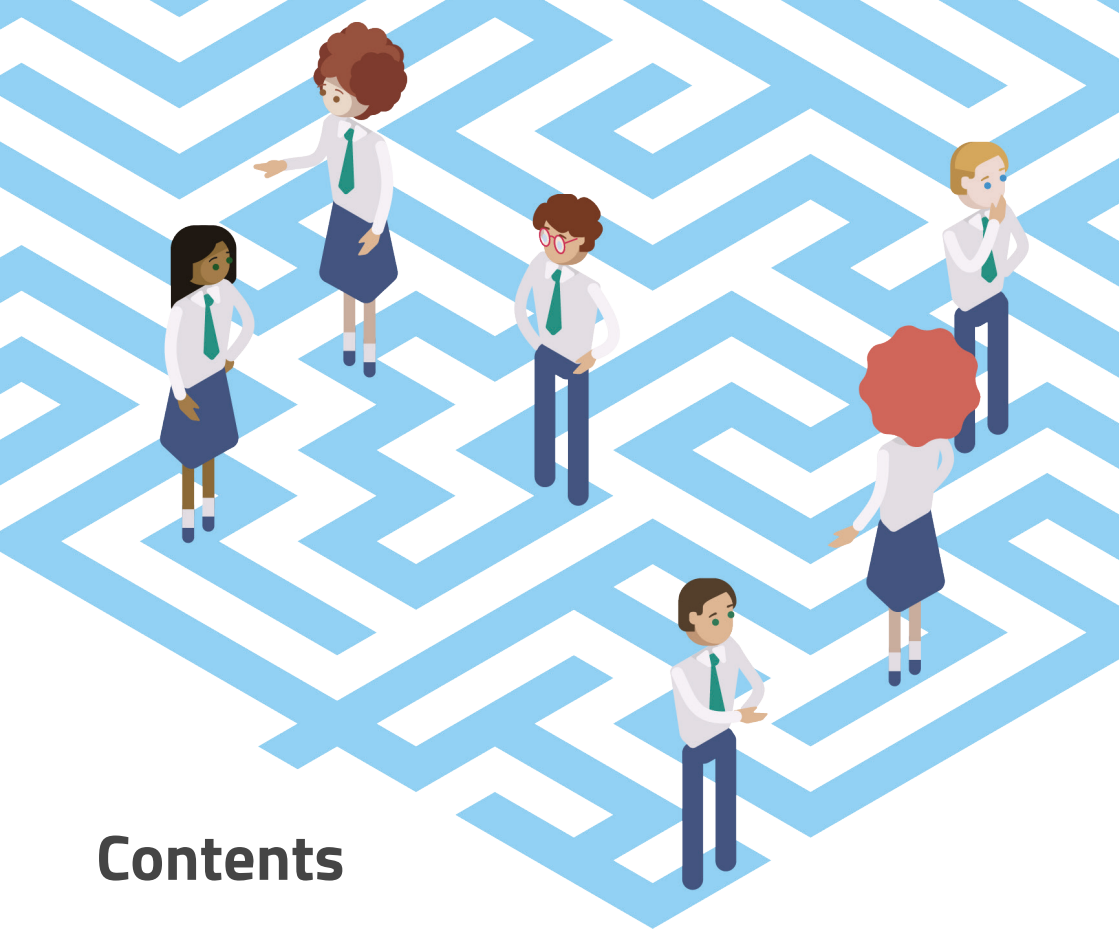firefly

BLENDED LEARNING GUIDE:

Taking teaching & learning to the next level

Top tips for navigating effective blended learning, including real life stories of how schools have supported their students, teachers, and parents.

Contents

Navigating the new normal with blended learning

Perhaps the biggest barrier to blended learning was people's attitudes. And then a pandemic hit, imposing distance learning and taking schools into uncharted waters. We all had to do things a little differently, often from a distance. And navigating the stormy waters of 2020 would have been unimaginable without the assistance of edtech. Schools rose to the challenge of lockdown learning with admirable alacrity, rolling out remote teaching at a rate of knots, while adopting blended teaching and learning models.

At its simplest, blended learning means embracing the very best of in-person and online teaching. And it doesn't necessarily entail extending your list of things to do.

Based on our conversations with teachers, we wanted to share a few tips on how to provide effective blended learning: what's been working for you on the ground, and what hasn't; what's been most helpful for learners, while reducing teacher workload?

> "
> One of the positive legacies of lockdown already has been that staff have been more open to using the flipped classroom approach. Being able to balance this with live and in-person contact has been beneficial but teachers have enjoyed continuing to provide students with opportunities to take responsibility for their learning."
>
> *Martin Willis, Digital Learning Coordinator,*
> *The Edinburgh Academy*

Flipping the Classroom

In summary, pupils learn the theory at home and then apply it in class. In practice, pupils consume a range of explanatory or instructional content asynchronously in the form of books, articles, videos, podcasts, and voiceover PowerPoints. Pupils can work in their own time, at their own pace, using content many times over. They can pause, rewind, rewatch, until ideas really stick.

1. Delegate some of the instruction to quality online videos.

Self-pacing, one of the big advantages of flipping the classroom, takes much of the stress out of learning new ideas. To keep your workload manageable, make the most of what's already out there. Curate the best online educational content courtesy of Khan Academy, YouTube, ClickView, AppleClips, BrainPop, and Planet eStream.

2. Make the most of the very best online written content.

To begin with, there's BBC, Teachit, Tes, and Oak National Academy, and teachers and pupils can share online textbooks with Classoos.

Parentkind has a helpful list of free online resources. Schools may wish to follow suit, publishing the best resources on their learning management system (LMS).

"One of my favoured techniques is to use Firefly to curate material I want students to investigate and use to work independently. It makes it very easy to take sections from websites, videos and other useful multi-media ensuring the students can easily access what they need without the distractions of the full WWW."

James Hoyle, Geography teacher,
Skipton Girls' High School

3. Set clear guidelines and targets for pupils.

Students need guidance. There's no point just letting them loose on the internet: it's too big! We all get distracted or, worse still, lost.

Be clear about what you want them to consume, and for how long. Outline key questions, or focus points. Encourage them to write their own questions as they go.

Tech can help. Flipgrid provides students with a forum for asking questions in advance of the lesson. With ClickView teachers are able to attach worksheets alongside videos or embed questions into them.

> "PSHE was at times, challenging to deliver during the pandemic. Subjects which depend on strong relationships and a comfortable learning environment were now having to be delivered remotely and this posed concerns and challenges. Using Firefly pages to host teacher videos and resources gave students time to consume, understand and reflect before sharing their thoughts and responses using Flipgrid."
>
> *Martin Willis, Digital Learning Coordinator, The Edinburgh Academy*

4. Use your own content.

Reuse or repurpose old content, or produce new material if you feel so inclined. The beauty of flipped learning is that educators can teach an idea once; the pupils can enjoy it many times over.

It could be something as quick as a short potted explanation using a PowerPoint presentation with voice recordings. Keep things simple. Involve pupils. Don't worry about creating the perfect finished product.

It helps pupils massively if you create a standard format or house style for your recorded lessons. They then learn what to expect and how best to respond.

"

For our remote learning tasks we used the concept of low floor and high ceiling. All our students would be given the basics of the tasks but also had opportunities to move on as high as they wish to go. In this way the responsibility moves to the learner, freeing them to be more imaginative in the way they approach their work."

Ronan McLaverty-Head, Head of Religion and Philosophy, The King's School

Enhancing Classroom Teaching

Flipped learning frees up that most precious commodity: time. Rather than needlessly expending finite energy on lengthy instruction, exposition or lecturing, teachers can focus their efforts on what really matters.

1. Devote lesson time to building relationships.

Relationships are the bedrock of education. Concentrate your efforts on one-to-one interaction, differentiation, and hands-on practicals. A pep talk or words of encouragement at just the right moment will make all the difference when supporting children with learning catch-up in the months ahead.
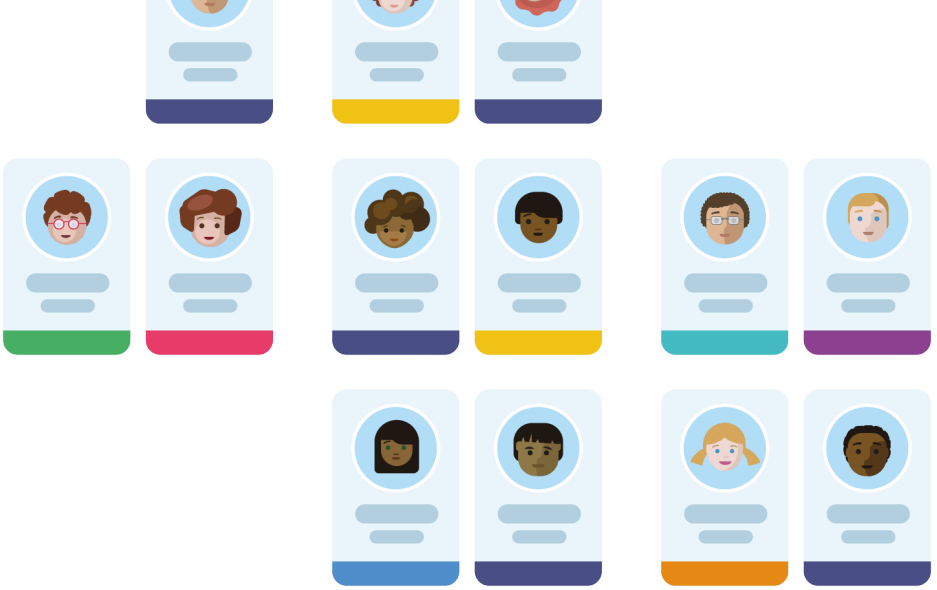
2. Take the best remote teaching practice back into the physical classroom.

It was hard for remote teaching to replicate in-person teacher-pupil interaction. That said, teachers built up a range of tricks to bring online lessons to life, and there's no reason why they won't work back in the classroom.

Random selector is perfect for cold calling, or choosing starter tasks or revision topics.

Timers concentrate young minds, create a buzz, and crank up the excitement of any lesson, as does the use of class polls.

3. Vary grouping and activities.

Ensure the right balance between individual, pair, group, and whole-class activities. With Firefly, there's the option of making seating plans which can be reshuffled at the touch of a button.

"

Evaluate carefully what works well online or with a digital tool, and what is better in person. For instance, low stakes quizzing or gathering resources is almost always going to be more effective online, but group work, especially with the primary and junior age groups, is likely to be better face to face."

Rachel Evans, Director of Digital Learning & Innovation, Wimbledon High School

4. Embrace tech learning and testing tools.

Make the most of devices in the classroom. Allow the use of laptops, tablets, and smartphones, so that pupils can interact with online content in lessons. That way, they can ask teachers and their peers about areas of interest or difficulty.

With the likes of Quizlet, Quizizz, Kahoot!, and Memrise, there's an embarrassment of riches out there, and they all make for lively, addictive lessons. Teachers are able, in essence, to gamify learning. These proven revision methods far outstrip passive reading of notes, while making assessment easy and instantaneous.

Encouraging Collaboration

Collaboration is an end in itself, not just a means to an end. First and foremost, it fosters teamwork, allowing pupils to develop active listening skills, as they learn to promote their own ideas, negotiate, and make compromises.

> "Collaborative learning has been really enhanced through technology, maybe even better than it was when face to face. Using forums in Firefly down as far as Year 2 has been really beneficial."
>
> *Simon Luxford-Moore, Head of eLearning, ESMS*

1. Collaborate to create and share resources.

Compiling revision notes, vocabulary lists or glossaries, group material for mock trials or debates? It's all made easy with Microsoft OneNote and its Class Notebook, Sway, Google Slides, Google Docs, Jamboard, or Padlet.

Other activities include: creative writing in teams, annotating poems, and sharing course specifications, model essays, exam rubric, and examiners' reports.

2. Make the most of multimedia.

Podcasts and videos, Instagram stories and TikTok, this is the everyday digital world of your pupils, so it's worth exploiting their enthusiasm for creating different forms of content.

And real-world tasks seem more relevant and worthwhile; they're often the best way to motivate more reluctant pupils, especially for tasks such as presentations.

3. Select your tools carefully.

Some tech is unwieldier than others. iMovie is proving popular with pupils. Flipgrid makes it easy for teachers to record video instructions to introduce tasks, while allowing for peer feedback.

"

We've found Jamboard invaluable for collaboration. It's simplicity itself, so pupils don't get distracted. It takes just minutes to set up a document and works best if you assign one pupil to oversee and take charge of a document. They can colour code revision notes and play with other presentation features to assist learning."

Georgina Cope, Head of English,
Stockport Grammar School

4. Get the whole school involved.

Some schools have successfully used Flipgrid or Padlet for whole-school activities, such as reading projects for World Book Day. Collating surveys, which would once have taken teachers days or weeks to do, is all done automatically. And adding emojis, speech bubbles, and suggested author websites bring it all to life.

"

During the first lockdown, we created an 'On the Bookshelf With...' page on each site; a visual bookshelf of the girls' recommendations. This page has proven so popular that when we returned to school, girls continued to post their recommendations; this has extended into the second lockdown and will likely carry-on for the foreseeable future."

Elizabeth Scott, Head Librarian, Queen's Gate School

Managing Formative Assessment & Feedback

Assessment and feedback take up so much time. They're also fundamental to teaching and learning. Let tech take the strain, so that teachers have more time to talk to their students about how they can develop and improve their work.

1. Use shared docs to monitor participation and understanding.

Teachers can learn so much by simply viewing version histories of shared work on Google Docs, or OneNote and its Class Notebook. The analytics on Microsoft Sway enable teachers to monitor engagement in greater detail.

2. Use tech to speed up feedback.

Shared docs provide the perfect means for teachers to offer their own ideas and timely feedback to pupils.

Furthermore, Firefly has its own markbook to keep a record of learner progression. And Google Forms can be used for baseline assessment and evaluations.

> Prompt questions are used to help students work towards a fuller understanding. I've used this technique when teaching about glacial processes or urban regeneration. It can be followed up by setting a focussed question using Firefly tasks or for more immediate feedback multiple-choice questions can also be used.
>
> Students like working things out for themselves and complete the task to a high standard independently. This can lead to higher levels of understanding."
>
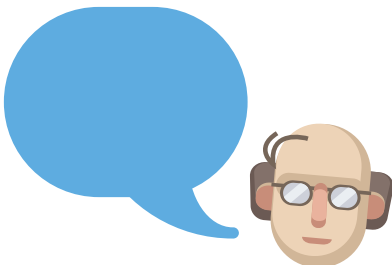> *James Hoyle, Geography teacher, Skipton Girls' High School*

> This year I have used the audio note feature a lot for GCSE classes and noticed where I left an audio recording I had far more engagement than if I left the same comment as text. Students suddenly started replying to me! "
>
> *Jane Masters, Biology teacher, The Grange School*

3. Make the most of timesavers like voice notes.

Teachers are also saving a lot of time by offering feedback in the form of voice notes. And pupils find this so much more personal, memorable, and motivating.
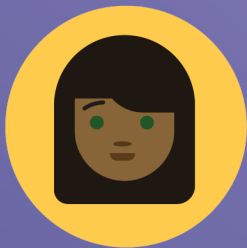
4. Set up and monitor peer assessment.

Let's not forget, peer assessment is so much easier on shared documents, and the teacher can moderate and collate pupils' contributions.
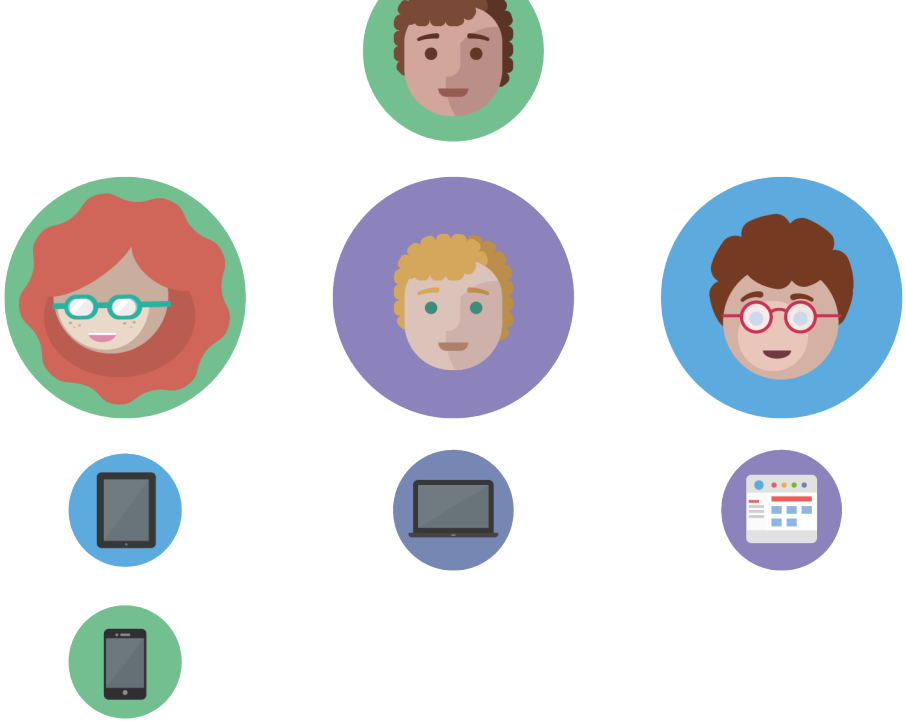
"

Voice notes are great for helping pupils with getting just the right pronunciation."

Delphine Masters, Modern Foreign Languages teacher, Exeter School

Including Pupils
in the Mix

Pupils are sold on the merits of blended learning, but obstacles remain. At the time of writing, schools and the government are talking about how best to roll out more devices in order to close the digital divide.

1. Survey pupils' preferences and audit their access to online learning.

Teachers would do well to keep asking pupils about which content and activities work best for them, while inviting pupils to do some of the curating and exploring. The internet is a big place, but your pupils are worthy pioneers.

> "The importance of data, which shows engagement times and lengths of time, has never been more important nor pertinent. Firefly Insights was incredibly informative in showing when students, staff and parents accessed Firefly. It detailed the peak times each day and allowed us to track trends over several weeks."
>
> *Simon Luxford-Moore, Head of eLearning, ESMS*

2. Use your reporting data and stats.

This will allow you to monitor patterns and behaviour, and see what is working best. Relying on guesswork or guesstimates is no longer necessary.

3. Make sure your material can be accessed on multiple devices.

If you're monitoring which devices they're using to access work, you can act accordingly. For instance, for those predominantly reliant on small screens, you'll want to keep your notes nice and big. This can have a huge impact with little extra work on your part.

4. Encourage pupils to help each other.

If pupils don't understand something, they're quick to message each other, so use pupils as your tech champions, both inside and outside school. They want to help each other out; they thrive on the responsibility.

"

During the period of school closure, teachers have discovered more about their students' capabilities. More than anything I feel student independence and resilience will become increasingly important to successful teaching and learning, and allow students to be more creative in the ways in which they engage with tasks."

Georgina Bruce, Art Teacher, Balcarras School

Upskilling Staff

Getting buy-in from staff, across the board, is essential, but some feel that managing teaching and learning content is needlessly complex and time-consuming. The best CPD, however, will show them how it can simplify their lives and save them time in the long run.

1. Train staff.

Use INSET time and make use of available online training courses which will allow staff to become a "Microsoft Educator" or "Google Certified Educator", and without huge financial cost. For some schools, this is all part and parcel of everyday business, with time set aside in staff briefings and meetings to share and celebrate blended learning and edtech successes.

2. Set up staff tech champions and buddy systems.

Encourage those pioneers who actively seek out and road test the best resources and tech. There is a bewildering amount out there; you need these early adopters. Formally recognise and reward their endeavours.

Buddy systems within departments will ensure "tech champions" cascade best practice to colleagues, and a mentoring system will help those who feel less secure about using the tech necessary for blended learning.

3. Set up an area for staff to share ideas and solutions.

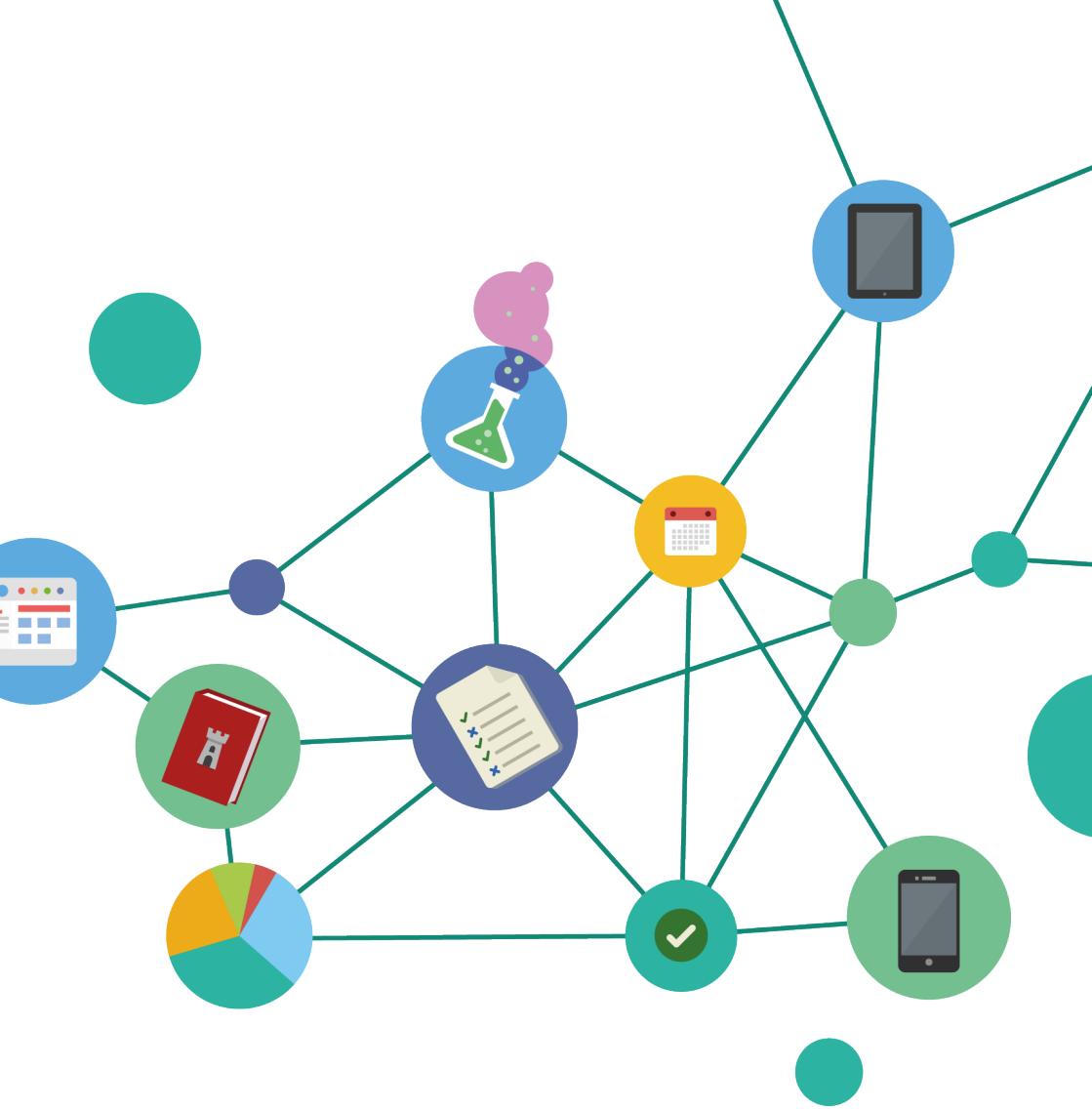A one-stop shop or query / solution forum is a quick way to address FAQs.

"

Our secondaries led the adoption of Firefly. Each school had a lead teacher whose role was to encourage the development of the platform at each school and to share their approaches with each other so that they can learn and develop together. Experience has taught me that you really need to give careful attention to the implementation of technology, if it is to be successful.

The system played a key role during the lockdown. A new centralised continuous professional development (CPD) portal went live on the system to help support staff. The portal contains CPD on remote and blended learning and includes information of good practice from around the trust. We think it's a really valuable resource."

Alex Handy, Assistant Head Teacher, Caludon Castle

4. Unify information and infrastructure to form one single ecosystem.

Teachers have neither the time nor the inclination to use multiple platforms when managing teaching and learning resources and information. A robust, flexible, fully integrated learning management system (LMS) is essential.

Supporting Parents

Learning is a shared endeavour, and parents want to get involved. It makes sense to keep them in the loop.

1. Promote blended learning in your communications with parents.

Engage parents in the blended learning conversation in newsletters, occasional texts, and your website.

> With Firefly's communication tool, all messages go into one mailing box and parents receive a round-up email on Wednesdays, that includes calls to action for the following week. They are targeted too - if a child is doing music, then they receive an update about music.
>
> It is a team effort, with all teachers able to contribute. You have to get the message out to your colleagues that every communication does count and that getting the right tone is key."
>
> *Rachel Brewster, Director of Marketing & Comms, Wimbledon High School*

2. Give parents easy, intuitive access to blended learning resources.

Now more than ever, parents want and expect a seamless experience at the touch of a button. Centralise resources so that they're visible and accessible to all: teachers, pupils, and parents.

All this saves time in the long run, as parents act as home-work chasers and cheerleaders for blended learning at home.

3. Keep parents up to date with ongoing assessment.

Firefly has its own mark book where teachers can log marks and check progress which can then be shared with parents.

Easy, immediate viewing of student profiles, including house points, demerits, interventions and suchlike, involves parents and ensures everyone is pulling on the same oar.

4. Offer tech support.

Schools are increasingly providing online office support and hotlines, manned by teachers in the day, and supplementary staff beyond that.

"

During our home learning experiences we used specific strategies to engage learners and keep parents informed of learning expectations and progress. Our Primary Years teachers created detailed pages and support resources each day for students and parents to access and students added their work to their Digital Portfolios in Firefly.

For Secondary students weekly tasks were created to outline synchronous and asynchronous learning and expectations and these were visible to parents and provided a space for collecting work and providing feedback."

Amanda Rablin, e-learning coordinator, St Peters Lutheran College

Final Thoughts

We hope you've found the tips and best practice above of use. We'd love to hear your thoughts or suggestions. Teachers have done so much upskilling in the last year, it would be a shame to let it all go to waste. And it seems that blended learning is here to stay, along with the tech tools that make it possible.

The teachers to whom we spoke are passionate about blended learning. Its central tenets inform everything they do. Education isn't something that just happens to pupils. It isn't something to be handed on a plate by the teacher in the lesson or downloaded on an app. Blended learning inculcates active learning where the pupil has to seek out knowledge beyond the narrow confines of the classroom. It involves many people and encompasses a range of activities and environments. Most importantly, it gives pupils greater autonomy, independence, and ownership of their learning.

And variety is the spice of life. Young people are easily bored. Novelty is essential. Alternating between tasks, formats, and media is likeliest to ensure young minds are constantly engaged and challenged.

The new normal is opening up a brave new world, but navigation will be a concerted team effort, and it's important to keep everyone on board. And a fleet is only as fast as its slowest ship. Providing seaworthy tech systems and tools for all will help to ensure that everyone is able to make the journey safely.

Further reading

Getting more from distance learning with a flipped classroom (fireflylearning.com)

One year on: What have we learnt from our lockdown experience? (fireflylearning.com)

Blended learning: 8 things students say work | Tes

FLIP_handout_FNL_Web.pdf (flippedlearning.org)

Lemov, Doug: Teaching in the Online Classroom: Surviving and Thriving in the New Normal (2020), Jossey-Bass

Simplify the management of teaching and learning!

Firefly is the trusted platform for Parent Engagement and Learning Continuity. With Firefly, schools can manage all aspects of school life, helping to reduce teacher workload, streamline administrative tasks and give parents a richer understanding of their child's learning.

Schools can choose the solutions they need:

Firefly Parent Portal

Firefly makes it easy for schools to share information, helps parents support student achievement and engages everyone in the learning conversation, without adding to the burden of busy teachers. Delivering a unified parent experience, it ensures that the home-school partnership is a fundamental part of the learning process.

Firefly LMS

Help teachers collaborate wherever they are, sharing resources to plan lessons, managing assignments and giving rich feedback to their students. Saving teachers time managing their classes, tracking progress and sharing students activities online, Firefly helps teachers to connect with their students beyond the classroom.

Firefly on Teams

Designed to save teachers time and help them support their learners more effectively, Firefly on Teams gives teachers the best of Firefly tools. It offers curriculum content tools allowing teachers to easily create, manage and share dynamic resources with students and teachers. It also includes classroom management tools giving teachers the ability to organise their classes all within Teams.

If you would like to
find out more, visit:

fireflylearning.com

firefly

The Parent Engagement and Learning Continuity platform

Find out more
fireflylearning.com
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Want a free demo of Firefly?

Head straight to fireflylearning.com/try-firefly/