



An interview reflecting on lessons learned during 8 weeks of online learning

In this written interview with Brian Van Tassel, Dean of Co-curricular Education and Pastoral Care, Interim Head of Schools, at the International Christian School (ICS), Hong Kong, he shares with us what the transition to Online Learning has been like for his team. Several of his leadership team contributed to the answers. Tim Shuman, Regional Director for International Schools. March 2020 (Don't miss the appendices on things like Modes of Delivery, Online Learning - Extraordinary Contingencies, and even an example of how to do concert band remotely!)

When did traditional classroom instruction end? How many weeks has it been so far? Do you have any idea when you will be able to return to classroom instruction? Did you start from nothing or did you already have some plans in place?

Abbreviation:

F2F = Face to Face.

Oll = Online Learning

EdB = Education Bureau (HK Government department)

We heard the news that F2F school would be suspended while we were on our Lunar New Year break (25 January 2020). Oll started on Feb 3, so we are approaching the end of our 6th week of Oll. EdB has announced the suspension of F2F in stages, with the most recent suspension to April 20.

We did have some plans in place (see Appendix 3) due to the protests that took place in Hong Kong in the Fall and forced the closure of school for 1 week. Also, we worked rather hard during the Lunar Year break as an admin team to create some basic policies and announcements, and at least begin the process of figuring out what we were going to do.

How fast were you able to launch elearning? What have you learned from the startup phase? What were any technological challenges to overcome? Did all households have necessary equipment to join in?

We launched on the day that school should have resumed after the Lunar New Year break, i.e. Feb 3. We let teachers know in advance that they would have some time on that first day back to prepare, but that they should be ready to post "something" for students by around noon of the first day.

Decisions also include those for employees, such as working from home vs coming to school in person.

We made provision for students to collect personal belongings from school in a way that would space them out / minimize interaction.

We are fortunate in that most of our stakeholders do have technology at home. We have continued to map this.

An early decision we made was that we wanted to ask all students and teachers to be available during their usual class periods (times). Regardless of the platform being used, this would allow for interaction between teachers and students at those times.

From the very beginning, also, we have attempted to manage expectations that this is not a holiday, this is OLL. We have tried to be consistent with our language. NOT “school is canceled”, but “We are delivering robust OLL in place of F2F learning”.

In general, I would say that the first week back was simply “survival” mode in terms of experimenting with various platforms to use and figuring out some of the “how” of OLL. Lots of tech support and workshops.

We also very quickly began a **feedback cycle** of surveying parents and students (and teachers) to find out what was working and what needed to be adjusted. This has been customized by the different needs of ES / MS / HS. We have continued to do this periodically. This has allowed us to be responsive. You will hear the squeaky wheels ... it’s important to have data that is more representative.

Likewise, admin has kept in close communication with Parent Association members, sometimes even running small “focus groups” to get better feedback.

REGULAR COMMUNICATION with all stakeholders is essential for clarity of expectations and understanding.

As time has progressed, we have been able to move beyond “survival” to greater intentionality, including:

- Consistency of communication - it helps to standardize the way that teachers post expectations for students, so that they are not juggling multiple methods. This is one that it would be helpful to standardize up front if possible.
 - It helps students and parent to organize if they can see a weekly plan (if possible) for when they need to show up for Zoom sessions, for example, and when assignments are due.
- Articulating “best practices” for online learning
 - An important mental hurdle for ALL to understand, including teachers, students, parents, and Board members, is that OLL will NOT look and feel like normal school. Do not expect that students will simply participate in “live” video conferencing from 8 am to 3 pm daily.
Managing expectations.
 - For example, for many non-educators, they may equate “teaching” with “the teacher standing in front of a group of students”. We needed to remind stakeholders that teachers are designers of learning experiences. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a teacher providing a pre-made video, websites, or texts for students to view / read, as long as there is intentionality and follow-up. This is not “self-learning”.
 - The key is that students are learning, and are demonstrating learning.
 - See Appendix 1 and 2 below.
- Developing common agreements e.g. frequency of Zoom lessons, and what works best subject by subject
- Tracking and following up systematically on students who are “not engaging”.
- Providing guidelines for parents about how they can support their kids at home.
- Providing mental health FAQ’s and support for students / parents stuck at home.

As the period of OLL became longer, after about week 2-3, an important shift of thinking started taking place. Let's be honest: OLL is not as efficient as F2F. This means that:

- As teachers, our mindset cannot just be to “do what I normally do, but online”.
- We need to pace ourselves.
- We began to ask questions such as: Of all the learning goals / standards that we normally teach, which ones are the most important for students to learn? Which ones will we touch on vs which ones will we ensure mastery of?
- We looked more carefully at our standards and probably got to know them better!
- We provided professional learning to support teachers in examining standards and making decisions about what to emphasize
- We began to document and map out “gaps” caused by the choices we are making about standards ... so that in future, teachers can mitigate these gaps over time in subsequent years.

Note: I don't think this phase could have been accelerated. **The first 1-2 weeks were all about survival and upskilling technically.**

- **What platforms did you utilize first? Have you made any changes since the startup? What adjustments had to be made? What are some things you wish you had thought of sooner for a better start? How have the very youngest learners done during this transition?**
 - We gave training in the following platforms / apps
 - Google hangouts / Meet (Elementary)
 - Zoom (Secondary) - even the free version is quite good, but if you can afford the paid version it is preferable. Zoom allows teachers to control the “chat” features that students are using.
 - Wish we had realized earlier that this can be recorded and then uploaded to the cloud. (Your laptop memory will fill up quickly ...)
 - Scrcastomatic
 - SeeSaw, Power School Learning, and Google Classrooms were already in place as platforms for teachers to post things and for students to upload work etc.
 - It is extremely difficult for the youngest learners, and for their parents, as they need so much support from home even to access the materials provided online, they need parents to help print things for them, provide materials (pencils, paper, etc and arts and crafts have to use items easily found at home).
 - We have sent out weekly learning plans /teaching videos by teachers (using Seesaw) with weekly deadlines for the youngest learners (PreK, KG and G1) so that parents can plan when they have time to help their child - parents may be working and children being cared for by grandparents etc. Parents upload videos or photos of their child's work and teachers reply with audio or video messages as the Kindergarten and Pre-K age children may not be able to read comments from teachers.
 - We have realized that it is not sustainable to expect every class to be “live”, nor is this the best pedagogy. In MS / HS at the moment we expect teachers to use Zoom in 1/3 of the class sessions only.
- **What does the teaching and learning look like now...is it video based, chat based, all of the above? Did you use a product/provider?**

See appendices 1 and 2 below. It varies a lot based on age, too.

For younger ones, because parental support varies, the asynchronous modes (such as a Screencast) have been helpful, because for some parents, they will work through these materials after they get home from work.

- **How do you foster Christian community in this phase? How does the second-grade teacher or the high school teacher care for her students? How do you keep your staff and faculty feeling connected and united?**
This is a challenge. Starting in about week 3, our MS spiritual life committee resumed some chapel videos / skits with discussion questions for homerooms to discuss. HS has been inviting student groups (whether “spiritual” or other) to provide short video devotionals, which are shared out with the community and can be discussed by homerooms. For younger learners, teachers are sending out devotions videos and links to worship songs, children / parents can also send in prayer requests.

One tip for faculty meetings (whether virtual or in person) is to allow some additional “chat” time for people to connect as they get together.

Also, to have the consistency of having faculty meeting weekly for HS has been important. There are also departmental meetings with the HS principal to answer questions, be available etc.

Early on, we were blessed that one of our parents who is a pastor and faculty spouse agreed to provide a weekly devotional for the whole school.

As interim Head of Schools, I have provided a (nearly) weekly address to the community. Topics have included:

- Opportunity
- Community
- Pace yourself
- What we have been learning from our students during these times
- Lamentation with hope - I think it’s important to give expression to the grief of a community because we do experience real losses

Teacher small devotional groups that were already in place have continued to meet virtually from time to time for encouragement / prayer. NOTE - we didn’t phase this back in until week 3 I think. Week 1 and 2 were simply overwhelming for figuring out the nuts and bolts of “how” to do OLL.

- **With some teachers scattered abroad, are there any time zone issues to work through?**
 - We have required our teachers to stay in Hong Kong, in order to be available at the normal time for our students.
 - Some families, however, have scattered to different places, so it means we have had to be flexible with students.
 - For Zoom, it is possible to record the Zoom session so that even those who miss a live session can access it later.

- **What has been the biggest challenge?**

It is difficult, grueling work without the normal rewards of being with kids and colleagues.

Parents who don’t discipline their kids and aren’t supporting them adequately from home.

Students who disengage and do not show up for Zoom sessions or keep track of their assignments

- It helps to have a plan for quick follow-up for students who are not engaging, e.g. phone calls home
- It may help to have a regular attendance plan from day 1 so that students get “trained” to keep a regular schedule.

Because things are so different, there is not much sense of “routine” at the beginning ... everything is new, so everything takes more mental and emotional energy. Decisions, policies, etc. take much more effort. It is important to accept this. Aspects of our school improvement plan have had to be significantly delayed just because we don’t have the “head space” to deal with them.

One of the most difficult parts for those of us involved with activity programming is not knowing when F2F will resume. We have made tentative plans, then had to scrap those plans and make more back-up plans each time OLL is extended. As the calendar shrinks, we constantly have to make decisions about events, including:

- Should it be canceled
- Should it be simplified
- Should it be re-scheduled to later in the semester
- Should next year’s schedule be adjusted to move it to Fall.

Summative assessment has proved to be difficult. It is very hard to be confident about the reliability of traditional assessments done from home. Students have ways of circumventing measures such as

- Requiring them to videotape themselves while doing the assessment
- Installing software that monitors what is on their screens (we have not done this).

Preparing university/college bound and hopeful high school students for external exams (SAT, ACT, AP) that are entry points to access university.

- **What has been the easiest or most surprising thing?**
 - Knowing that some of the new systems, processes, and resources will streamline future learning and work, even when we are running a face to face school again.
- **What about your non-teaching staff and support roles?**
 - Some of the traditional roles like TA supervision are reduced. Some of our part time TA’s have not been working and therefore not receiving pay. We have enlisted other support staff to provide some additional support for struggling students at home through phone call check ins and online tutorial.
- **How does the Guidance Counselor fulfill their duty during this time? ESL? Tutors? Support?**
 - One-to-one Zoom sessions allow for guidance and mental health counseling to continue.
 - Learning Support staff reach out to students and families on their caseload to help them navigate OLL
 - Academic advisory to help students select courses for the next academic year has been conducted by:
 - Screen casting the message from the Academic Coordinator
 - Students completing their 4-year graduation plan with a combination tool/process using a Google form connected to a Google spreadsheet with an autocrat add-on
 - Students sign up with their academic advisor online using [youcanbookme](#) (free version).
 - Academic advisory was conducted using [zoom](#) (free version).
- **What kind of concerns should leaders anticipate now from the home community?**
 - Wellbeing, some students have not left their homes for weeks. The school has provided some online
 - Addressing mindsets that may look at online learning with disdain. It requires all or more effort from students without the payoff of social interaction.

- Be careful of being too task oriented. We have had to build in some online meet times for spiritual and social connection.
- **Are there any child-safety issues that you have had to consider as you launched elearning?**
 - We have adopted a more flexible concept of “attendance” because not every class has live attendance each period. Some schools do continue to take attendance each period. However, the key is that we know that all students are engaging and that we are following up with those who do not engage.
 - Consider requiring 1 on 1 Zoom sessions to be recorded if needed for safeguarding. We have not required this for all 1 on 1 interactions, but some schools have.
- **Can you share with us some of the most creative instructional things you’ve seen done by your teachers?**
 - Language teachers using the breakout option in Zoom to have smaller groups talking with each other, have also used this for small group discussion.
 - Filming science experiments in the school lab.
 - AP Physics using toilet paper rolls at home for a lab. Other at home labs done with common materials.
 - Concert Band “performance” See Appendix 4
- **Comment on the level of stress that leadership has carried. How do you care for one another?**
 - One day at a time
 - Be flexible
 - Lay down your expectations.
 - Sharing and Prayer
- **What about the stress level on teachers? How do you support them?**
 - Principals have done a great job of doing regular 1 on 1 and small group checkups with teachers to see where they are at.
 - Check in with teachers with a 1 - 10 stress level rating then moving on to what is driving their stress: for the most part it was teaching and learning at school and not worried about getting sick, or shortages of supplies in Hong Kong such as masks, etc.
 - Principals joining in on Zoom calls with students. Allows for connection with students and also as a support for further coaching conversations with the teacher.
 - Over communication of rationale has been helpful for some teachers. For example, the decision on why teachers were required to be in Hong Kong.
- **What would you say to teachers who are about to be asked to move to online learning?**
 - Pace yourselves
 - Focus on what is most important for student learning
 - Do not expect that you will deliver the same lessons in an online format ... adjust for what works in this new context
 - Be ready to learn a lot that will help you grow as a teacher
 - Keep connecting with one another and with God, keep yourself healthy mentally, physically, and spiritually to have the stamina and endurance you need.
- **What about your finance and your IT teams?**
 - They are working hard, rotating working from home vs at school

- **What about your facilities? How are they being cared for? Security?**
 - Not everyone can work from home, not much has changed for cleaning staff and security staff.
- **It might be too early to tell, but is there anything that you might keep from this entire experience once school opens up again?**
 - I suspect we will use Zoom / other video conferencing tools more flexibly, for example, to facilitate parent conferences even if a parent is out of town
 - I suspect we will use tools such as [Screen-cast-o-matic](#) much more adroitly.
- **What is the silver lining in this entire process?**
 - I think we now value more some of the things that have been “lost”, e.g. community events, being with one another.
 - Lots of professional learning related to technology
 - Better understanding of our learning standards as we decide what is most important.
 - HS: Moving away from assessments that are strictly test based and looking at alternative assessments.
- **If you have time please list some of the most helpful resources that you and your team have used.**
 - Zoom
 - [Google Hangouts / Meet](#)
 - Screencastomatic
 - Seesaw
 - PowerSchool Learning
 - The normal stuff - quality rubrics and assessments.
 - Google suite

Check out this document of [free online learning resources](#)

- **Other**
 - Develop procedures for e.g students to come to campus to pick up library books or other materials from time to time in a way that minimizes student to student contact.
 - For example, we label items and place them on a long table near the school entrance so that they can be picked up swiftly. Students are given times of day based on alphabetical order when they can come in to pick things up, to minimize contact.
 - MS has had some success with “catch-up days” occasionally where students are given a day to catch up on work and teachers can do conferencing with individual students who need it.
 - Regular collaboration: It is important to keep regular schedules of collaboration (in person or by Zoom) including faculty meetings, grade level teams, professional learning communities, etc. so that teachers can share what is working and support one another.
 - IT department needs to be vigilant about supporting the technical needs of teachers and students as much as possible. For example, providing microphones and speakers to enable “blended” meetings with some participants engaging in person and some virtually; providing loaner laptops where needed
 - Check out this detailed [Online Learning FAQ for ES parents](#) - helpful for setting expectations.

Appendix 1: Summary of what has not really changed about learning! This is what should be driving us

Regardless of how learning is facilitated (face-to-face, online), the following core elements are involved in the cycle of teaching / learning / determining effectiveness:

- Clear learning targets (Standards, Benchmarks, Goals) on which teachers are basing their instructional design.
- Clear communication of learning expectations to students (Descriptions, rubrics - varies based on age appropriateness)
- Designing and delivering learning experiences (multiple valid formats e.g. mini-lectures, student readings, videos, collaborative student activities, student investigation ...)
- Gathering evidence of learning (across a wide range of formative and summative) including
 - Informal Observations
 - Products and performances that students produce to show learning, whether written, video, audio recordings, physical models, presentations, etc.
- Assessing evidence of learning and planning for future teaching / learning (done by teachers)

Appendix 2: Modes of delivery for online learning

Some typical modes of delivery of online learning:

- Video Conferencing (live)
 - Could be used for new instruction
 - Used with whole-class, small groups, or individuals.
 - Used for Q&A times
 - Used for student collaboration / discussion
 - Used to gather feedback about student learning
- Screencast
 - Teacher can present a ppt with “voice-over” to add oral explanation to slides
- Preparation of learning materials for students to access independently
 - Sourcing of quality videos that explain concepts or “hook” interest. (It is not necessary for teachers to create their own videos, the online world is full of many excellent videos that already teach concepts well)
 - Text sources - online textbooks, webpages, articles that students read to understand new ideas and information.
- Designing assignments / ways for students to interact with new learning
 - Essential is designing ways for students to interact with new learning and show their own learning in response, so that learning can be assessed.
 - Products and performances that students produce to show learning, whether written, video, audio recordings, physical models, presentations, etc.
- Providing feedback about student learning
- Platforms like SeeSaw, Google Classroom, and Power School Learning allow for students to upload work and receive feedback without live interaction.

Appendix 3: Online Learning Extraordinary Contingencies

Online Learning Extraordinary Contingencies For ICS Secondary School

Definition

An extraordinary contingency is a school closure due to unusual and/or unpredictable circumstances (socio-political unrest, major health crisis, major natural disaster etc.) that causes consecutive or sustained days of school closure.

Purpose

ICS desires that extended absences from school due to extraordinary contingencies cause as little disruption to student learning as possible. ICS commits to finding viable online options to keep learning moving sufficiently forward as opposed to requiring students to complete additional school days or extending the school year.

Expectations for Faculty

We are essentially "working" during days missed due to extraordinary contingencies. ICS leadership will communicate teacher expectations for working at school or at home. As you plan tasks for students to complete note the following:

Managing the work?

- Activities should be for odd or even lessons aligned to the particular day(s) missed. The flow of work and time frames given to students should follow the ICS odd/even day schedule.
- Plan live streams, chats or real time connections with students to occur within the normal scheduled days and timeframes for each class. Students need to be given at least 24 hours notice for a "live" session. Do not schedule live lesson or teaching sessions during the normal MS or HS lunch times. Keep to time and do not schedule or allow your live sessions to run over into other blocks. At least one out of the three lessons (two out the six lessons for MS Humanities) in each six day cycle must be a live real time session.
- Plan tasks and instructions that the students can realistically accomplished while at home.
- Consider if you want students to essentially revise or practice things previously covered or if you want them to prep for, and or engage with new material. You may consider setting work that is not part of your current unit if the current stage of learning would be very difficult to translate into an online at home activity.
- The amount of work you set should require students to work for no longer than 50-60 minutes per class. This is to allow a little margin which should ensure no student will be working for longer than a normal class period on any one subject. This amount of time is to cover everything for the day. You may not then set additional "homework" tasks on these days to have the students work another 20 minutes on your subject.
- Deadlines to finish work should be clearly stated to students, as should your intention for the work to be used summatively or formatively. If work is set to completed over a number of days or a full week check in points or a suggested timeline of targets should be given to students to help them stay on track.
- Clearly state how you want the work submitted back to you.
- Students who do not complete work need to be engaged in a discussion to ascertain the reasons for their non completion. We need to consider the possibility that the mental state of students may be negatively affected by the circumstances that cause the school cancellation. Assigning students to HW club / Study Support for non completion of work may be an option - discussion with the MS/HS Principal must occur before this is approved.
- Provide concise and clear lesson instructions - consider bullet point or numbered lists rather than longer chunks of text.
- Please date everything. Having the full date at the top of posts,taks etc is helpful for parents to know when the post was from. If you label something as due "Thursday", it's harder to know if that's previous missing work from last week, or still due this week.

Communication

- Please communicate to students through school email and/or Power School Learning. Daily work activities and expectations should be communicated and available for students by 9:00am on the morning of the school closure day.
- Learning targets as well as instructions should be communicated to students
- Communication should remind students what to do if they get stuck, and how you want them to communicate back to you if they need to.

Your availability during the day

- You must be available from 8:30am to 4:30pm
- It is not expected that you are sitting next to your computer all day but you must check regularly enough to respond to student's questions in a timely fashion on the same day and within the 8:30am to 4:30pm time frame. Your daily PSL or email instructions should communicate with students if there are optimal times for them to ask questions and what format you want them to communicate with you. If you are not available for a period of time during the day you should indicate this in the instructions given to students.
- It is important for the students to realise while they may choose to do set work anytime you are only available to help between 8:30 and 4:30 and within any further limitations you have set within this time frame. Students questions sent to you after 4:30pm can be responded to the following day.

Power School Learning Reminders

- Ensure that all students update their PSL Settings to receive “instant email” notifications when announcements or assignments are posted.
- Emails (instant and daily summaries) to students are only generated to students through what you post in the “announcements” or “assignments” box. If you have just created a text box or other kind of box students can only see what is there when they are looking at your class page. Emails to students are not generated from a text box on a PSL page.

Catch Up Days - may be periodically scheduled during periods of online learning The parameters for this day are:

- This is a day for students to catch up on any outstanding work from previous odd or even day classes, no new or additional work to be set.
- Teachers may choose to email targeted students to remind them of missing work. Teachers also need to be available for students to contact them to provide guidance with any catch up work.
- Students have the responsibility to contact teachers if they want to get direct help and input during the catch up day.
- If the student asks for a zoom session teachers are free to set this up during the catch up day but teachers cannot require students to be present at zoom sessions.

Expectations for Students

- Access to computer or online device.
- Check PS Learning and school email daily for schedules and instructions
- View uploaded materials and respond to teacher postings daily, taking note of when teachers are available to respond to your questions.

- Complete posted assignments daily or as directed by the teacher. It is expected that you keep up-to-date with the daily work posted.

Ideas for direct teaching online

- Narrated PPT/Google lesson slides
- Teacher produced or Youtube videos
- Screencasts or podcasts
- Online apps/games/resources ICS has a subscription to or students can easily access
- Directed online searches or specific website research

Ideas for student responses

- Record video, submit digital photographs or sound recordings
- Google Drive document
- Power School Learning

Potential Resources

- [20 engaging flipped learning apps for in the flipped classroom](#)

Plan live streams, chats or real time connections with students to occur within the normal scheduled days and timeframes for each class. Students need to be given at least 24 hours notice for a “live” session. Do not schedule a live lesson or teaching sessions during the normal MS or HS lunch times. Keep to time and do not schedule or allow your live sessions to run over into other blocks. At least one out of the three lessons (two out the six lessons for MS Humanities) in each six day cycle must be a live real time session.

- ❖ It is important to regularly evaluate the balance between live zoom sessions and independent work expectations to maintain a frequency of zoom sessions with either whole classes, groups or individuals that provide enough opportunities for interaction/feedback and questioning with students. Consider the following
 - How many students in the class are functioning well, and handing in work that is on time and of the quality you have come to expect from them? This probably indicates that your current balance between live sessions and independent work is working well for these students
 - How many students are less organised, are not proactively in seeking help, are avoiding work and missing deadlines? These students may need more mandated live sessions.
- ❖ Planning live sessions, consider the balance of:
 - **Direct Instruction** - taking time during the live session for teacher demonstrations/presentation and explanations of tasks and instructions.
 - **Check In/Feedback** - time given to evaluate how students are progressing on tasks already given and/or to give feedback. Giving time for students to ask questions.
 - **Students Working** - having students work while their video is live or having students exit the live session to do some work and then come back together for a second end of class live plenary or wrap up session

Of course these points do not necessarily guarantee improved online work habits from students but it does help us confidently stand behind the claim that we are working hard to provide support and opportunities to students within those things that we do have control over.

[Appendix 4: Concert Band Performance](#)

My Concert Band students have blown me away with their chamber ensemble projects. They were working in chamber ensembles for the 2 1/2 weeks before CNY, and we were going to spend the week and a half after CNY wrapping up the chamber ensembles and then conclude with a summative chamber ensemble performance.

In lieu of being able to do the performances in person, I asked them to record their parts individually and then put the parts together into one digital file, editing the file to make sure the parts lined up (this has been their sole band assignment the last 1 1/2 weeks). My percussionists were asked to improvise instruments at home - some have more instruments at home than others - and used a variety of physical surfaces to try to recreate instruments. Ryusei, who is in Korea, even went the extra step to rent a tuba in Korea so that he could do his recording.

Though not every group was polished, these recordings in particular were very well done! You wouldn't even know that each part was recorded in isolation and then put together digitally - it sounds like they are all in one room playing together. And note that Samuel wrote the piece for percussion ensemble - pretty impressive.

Enjoy listening to these works of art!