Digital Teaching Literacy

DigiTeaL

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

GUIDELINES

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Abstract

Guidance produced in discussion with teachers, about five classroom management topics.

DEMOKRITOS

Emphasys CENTRE

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

UNIVERSITATEA DIN BUCUREȘTI

Bennohaus Arbeitskreis Ostviertel e. V.

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1. BACKGROUND

These guidelines have been created to cover five classroom management topics, identified in Phase 1 of the DigiTeaL project through surveys, focus groups and interviews with teachers, which led to the creation of the DigiTeaL framework.

The national and comparative results of the Phase 1 data collection are available to read online.

In Phase 2, we spoke again with teachers to ask for more information specifically about the five classroom management topics, and recommendations and best practice from these discussions are presented below.

2. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Interviews and focus groups took place in all partner countries. Depending on what was most convenient for the participants, these were carried out either in-person, over the phone or via online meeting systems such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

Cyprus

5 educators took part - 2 with a background in primary education, 2 in secondary education and one with experience at both levels. All had a different educational background, teaching ICT, STEAM, Biology, English and Mathematics.

Germany

4 teachers and professionals in the field of education with experience in teaching online classes took part. The participants were: two secondary school ("Gymnasium" – high school) teachers (subjects: Spanish, French, German, Music), one teacher at a professional college (subjects: English, Health) and one college lecturer (area: social work and ethics).

Greece

5 teachers took part: 3 were primary school teachers and 2 were secondary school teachers. The primary school teachers were generalists, and the secondary school teachers taught literature and physics.

Romania

9 school counsellors and teachers from primary and secondary education took part. They all teach a range of subjects. They are education specialists who plan and carry out individual or group educational counselling activities whose objective is to adapt the pupils to problems specific to the school environment, as well as teaching careers, heath education, personal development, social and civic education. All had previous experience with SEN pupils in mainstream education.

United Kingdom

6 teachers took part, 1 in primary school, 3 in secondary school and 2 from college (for 16-18 year-old students). 6 worked in mainstream education (with some SEN pupils), and 1 worked in SEN education. The primary school teacher was a generalist. The second school teachers taught music, maths and drama. The college teachers taught physical education (PE) and economics.

3. FINDINGS AND BEST PRACTICE

3.1 Risks and Benefits of Online Learning for Students

Best Practice:

- Look for ways to manage obstacles such as bad internet connection or lack of equipment.

- Tools promoting interactivity are vital for online teaching.

- Take advantage of online teaching to adapt to different students' paces (e.g. video instructions that students can watch as many times as they need).

- Transfer online activities which worked well to face-to-face teaching (e.g. quizzes).

- Try asking students to turn off their cameras or to disconnect additional devices from their home internet if there are connection problems during a lesson.

- Consider whether there are opportunities to get students to move around in their physical environment instead of sitting and looking at the screen throughout the session. Can they get up and find a relevant item in the home, for example?

- You may be able to use phone data to boost the internet connection of your laptop.

Teachers identified the overall benefits of online teaching, not only during the pandemic. For example, it can be used with pupils who find it difficult to attend face-to-face classes due to disability, ill health or living in a remote/inaccessible area (such as islands off the mainland). Such use would promote equal access to education.

The forced use of online teaching during the pandemic also resulted in a lot of professional development during that period, as all teachers had to learn how to use new technological tools and modify their teaching style for online use. This affected teachers differently, even within the same country and area, as while some viewed it as an opportunity or an interesting challenge, others found it tiring, stressful or a source of anxiety.

Teachers in Romania found that a lack of preparation to teach online was also a cause of stress, as was the noticeable difference in technological competence compared to their students. Technical issues combined with the need to modify lesson planning and use creative new ways of engaging students, meant the initial switch to online teaching was difficult. UK teachers found that increased familiarity with the tools gave a sense of control which made teaching easier.

On the other hand, teachers found online teaching saved time when checking homework and having meetings with parents.

In Cyprus, Romania and the UK, some of the challenges students faced challenges such as bad internet connection, not having the right equipment or not having enough equipment (e.g. if several family members had online learning and work at the same time). In many cases, teachers resorted to changing their internet provider or upgrading their usage plan to resolve the issue of internet access, and so did not have other suggestions for this. Teachers in Greece had some success with asking students to switch off their cameras and disconnect any unnecessary devices from their internet, at times when the connection was bad. The Greek government also tried to reduce network congestion by staggering teaching for different levels. For example, primary school classes were scheduled in the morning, and secondary school classes from noon onwards. Teachers in Cyprus sometimes used the data from their phones to create a hotspot for their laptops when the connection was bad.

Teachers in Germany, Greece and Romania noticed that some students lost interest or motivation. The German teachers found this particularly for students who profit from the communication and fun they have with their classmates and learn more easily that way. Having to study at home in front of their computer feels very boring for them and they lose the motivation to learn. The Greek teachers also found a communication gap, due to not being able to observe students' reactions and emotions, which made it harder to manage the students in the online classroom. It is thus considered important to use tools that promote interactivity. Examples of this included using software solutions such as meeting rooms to encourage small group activities or discussions. For younger children, their home environment could be used to extend the physical space of the classroom. For example, they could be asked to get up from their desk and find a specific object in the home, or to count the number of a particular item such as chairs.

For performance-based subjects, online teaching could be difficult. It was not possible to correct the students if they did any movement incorrectly, when viewing them only through small boxes on the screen. For more physical subjects, UK teachers noticed that students sometimes watched a lesson while in the car or otherwise not able to physically take part, thus missing some of the benefits of the class. This had a knock-on effect for future recruitment. For example, for the first year after the pandemic lockdown, fewer students chose drama as a GCSE or A-level option (working towards UK exams at age 16 and 18). However, this effect was reversible if schools really promoted and invested in those subjects.

As a negative aspect of online teaching, most of the Greek teachers mentioned the difficulty in socializing children. One UK teacher found that drama students became more introverted and lost confidence. Romanian teachers noticed that although physical bullying stopped, there was an increase in cyberbullying. Increased screen dependency was also a concern. However, the German teachers felt that many students benefited from the lack of physical disturbances by classmates or school surroundings during live classes. They felt more safe and calm at home, and could more easily concentrate on the given tasks and absorb the learning input.

Students in Cyprus found some activities, such as online quizzes, engaging and interesting and would like to continue them during face-to-face situations. UK teachers agreed that parts of online teaching should be brought into the classroom. Feedback was sometimes lacking or irregular during online classes, so elements such as online quizzes could also help with that.

The German teachers noted that the risks and benefits of online learning vary from student to student according to their individual learning needs. It is important to cater to those different needs and situations by providing a variety of methods and learning strategies.

3.2   Netiquette in Online Learning Environment

Best Practice:

- Create a "netiquette" policy and share that with teachers, students and parents.

- Involve students in the creation of your policy.

- With colleagues, gather information about known issues with the tools you use.

In Cyprus and the UK, participants suggested that netiquette was not really an issue for students, as the same rules they had in class also applied in online education. The "raise hand" option was great to have (although not available in all video conferencing tools at the beginning). Greek teachers, in contrast, (and one UK teacher) thought it would be good to have training on netiquette both for teachers and students, as well as information about expectations shared with teachers, students and parents.

The German teachers thought that involving students in actively creating netiquette for their online classes was a good way of resolving or preventing any problems in their interactions. Faced with this new reality, it was very important to provide the time and opportunity to talk about communication, rules and issues in the class community.

Greek and Romanian teachers identified some problematic behaviour by students in the beginning. For example, students hiding their real names and being impolite during classes, or the increase in cheating and even cyberbullying between students, teachers not being able to see and control some behaviours. German teachers also identified cyberbullying via private chats, and UK teachers found a similar issue, where during class, students were using a different system to argue online. An agreed netiquette policy from the start may have helped with this. As well as standard classroom rules, the policy should cover new "online-only" rules, such as asking students to mute themselves during a session, unless they have a specific question. The policy may need to cover expectations for parents where issues have been noted. For example, in Cyprus, teachers noted that some parents were giving their children the answers to questions in class, instead of letting them think and answer at their own pace.

In Greece, teachers identified a need to have information and to gather all the things that need to be done and the mistakes or omissions that create problems in one tool.

3.3 Enhancing Students Engagement and Motivation during Online Learning

Best Practice:

- Include frequent breaks.

- Spend less time teaching, and more time on physical activities, group activities and discussions.

- Set the target learning clearly at the beginning of online sessions.

- Use videos and case studies to make things more engaging and interesting.

- Ask students to have cameras on so you can monitor their engagement (where this is allowed by school and national privacy policy).

- Use get-to-know-you / reconnect activities if participation starts to drop during a session.

- Train students on email communication if they are not already used to it.

- Consider whether online methods can be carried over to face-to-face to encourage participation by shy or quiet students; could they still communicate in writing instead of verbally?

- Keep in contact with students by phone outside of lessons (e.g. each student receives one check-in phone call from their form tutor each week).

- Set up activities to encourage engagement specifically for the first session of the morning.

- Keep parents informed and contact them directly about student engagement and participation issues.

- Consider whether some face-to-face teaching can be used for specific students with problematic participation or engagement.

In Greece, teachers believed that the interactivity of lessons is the key to motivating students and to a successful lesson. Sometimes they were frightened by the lack of participation from students and tried to "transfer" the motivation they use to face-to-face teaching. For example, to give as an exercise an online get-to-know/reconnect game.

The solutions teachers were trying to find were through their own research and through communication with their colleagues, but they would like to have better information about this. This was echoed by the Romanian teachers, who said there were initially no standardized state-level measures in helping teachers to discover and learn new techniques to attract students' engagement and motivation during online classes.

Action taken at national level was helpful, such as "Save the Children" trainings in "Net Hour" ("Ora de net") program, or other online courses offered free of charge to teachers. However, most had to learn by themselves to use different apps and programs that would help to adapt teaching methods to online learning. Usually they used online whiteboards, quizzes, participative apps, PowerPoint presentations and movies. The German teachers also found that sometimes their students would teach them new digital tricks that could be applied during lessons.

With patience and time, the "new reality" sunk in and many students realized that it was more fun to participate actively in the online classes than not to participate. For some students, new forms of participating were possible. For example, shy students who did not want to speak out loud in class, could now participate by writing comments and answers in the chat.

The main challenge was to convince children to keep their camera on, in order to keep direct contact with them. There were no official rules for that, just a recommendation from the Romanian Ministry of Education, so teachers couldn't insist on it. The German teachers also found this difficult, with one commenting "*Talking into a void of black screens was a horrible feeling*".

The UK teachers found that students' motivation and engagement were affected by their own characteristics, the lack of classroom environment, and the lack of technical skills and equipment. Students in the bottom set tended to struggle more with engagement and motivation than those in the top set, who also tended to have more parental support and engagement. The German teachers similarly found it seemed much harder to motivate their students when not physically being present in a classroom. The students had to learn to take responsibility for autonomous learning, for creating their own learning space and for actively participating in online classes.

If students did not have a personal space to study at home, that could affect their motivation. In some cases, siblings could be heard running around in the background. Low technical skills and lack of technical equipment could also be an issue, although this could be mitigated by giving laptops to the students and by training them in online communication such as sending emails. Where students could only access lessons by phone, it caused issues when they were swapping between multiple applications e.g. using OneNote, Teams and YouTube during the same lesson. Teachers noted that the distribution of laptops was possible due to governmental grants.

Students with SEN could find online learning more distracting, if they were used to having one-to-one support in class. Using teaching assistants to provide those students with prompts to bring their attention back to the session could help with this. It was also important to make the sessions fun, with short instructions and lots of demonstration.

UK teachers also noticed an issue with timing, as some students struggled to attend online classes early in the morning and requested that online lessons start later than in-person school. This was not possible to change at any of the schools interviewed, but may be an option to consider for schools and teachers who would also find it convenient to be flexible.

For one UK teacher, motivation was about keeping the community together, which required lots of team effort.

> *"Every student received a phone call every week from their formal tutor in the first lockdown. When we went into the second lockdown, we had registration every morning and activities specifically designed for the start of the morning to communicate with the students and engage with them, and any students that did not turn up would receive a phone call, and their parents".*

As a last resource, where some UK teachers had particular concerns about a student's engagement, they would call the student to the school, in a controlled environment, and teach face-to-face. Of course, this possibility depends on many factors, including national lockdown and social isolation guidelines, transport availability for the student, teacher availability (if already teaching a full calendar of online classes) and health/vulnerability of all involved.

Personal knowledge of students, gained by in-person teaching before the lockdowns, was cited as an important factor in motivation; it enabled teachers to cater more to each student's individual needs. Teachers felt this would have been more difficult with students who were being taught only online with no face-to-face interaction.

3.4   Managing Learners with Special Needs during Online Learning

Best Practice:

- Provide instructions in more than one format, according to students' needs.

- Provide video instructions or demos that students can watch and rewatch at their own pace.

- Use students' names to individualise communication, and give positive feedback.

- Use teaching assistants during online teaching to give extra support.

- Use chat rooms in online tools such as Teams, WebEx, to give private one-to-one support as needed during class.

- Do not pressure students to speak during online classes, let them use chat if preferred.

- Prioritise student connection with staff, which could be through dedicated mentors or teaching assistants, extra online or phone meetings, or fun activities (games/stories) instead of teaching activities.

- If the students have more complex needs, invite them to school to allow them to access the online classes with an adult in the room who can support them.

- Post printed materials to students if they would have difficulty using online-only versions.

In all partner countries, teachers had a mainly positive experience while preparing inclusive online classes for SEN students. Teachers in Cyprus mentioned that SEN students were more comfortable engaging through the chat and writing their input during brainstorming activities. In Greece, teachers said that SEN students felt more secure and successful during online teaching because they were teased less and had more time to process their teachers' questions and new information. They also mentioned that for children with mobility difficulties or chronic illnesses, online teaching was a positive experience, as it was much easier to access lessons. One UK teacher found that SEN students progressed better during online teaching, due to less distraction in online classes. In Germany, teachers found similarly that SEN students felt safer at home and participated more than in offline classes.

However, teachers of physical and performance-based subjects found online classes could be more distracting for SEN students. It was important to make sessions fun and interesting, and to include SEN students by taking account of their needs. For example, one teacher prepared visual instruction cards for students with hearing loss, and used short and clear spoken instructions for visually impaired students. For performance-based subjects, preparing videos to explain complex tasks was beneficial, so students with SEN could go through step-by-step at their own pace. Where necessary, materials could also be posted out to students instead of only being shown online.

Teachers also used students' names to personalise communication. Positive feedback was essential. Students with SEN sometimes needed additional support to maintain connection. For example, they may have extra online meetings with a dedicated mentor or teaching assistant (on top of e.g. regular phone calls for every student in class as mentioned in the topic above). Teachers could also take time to do "fun" activities such as playing games together or reading stories, instead of focusing purely on teaching materials, if they felt students with SEN were being demotivated or disengaged. It was also important not to put pressure on students e.g. respecting if they do not wish to speak online.

Online teaching allowed teachers to use technology in a creative way. Students with processing difficulties sometimes found it challenging when they could not ask their friends a quick question, or there were no nonverbal cues to pick up. Using private online chat rooms in tools like Teams and WebEx, teachers could provide extra information for their students with SEN if needed.

If students had more complex needs, they were invited to the school and were able to access online classes with an adult in the room, who could support them. Otherwise, teaching assistants joined the online sessions to provide additional support and prompting for the students.

German teachers said it was easier to help SEN students directly by creating break-out sessions, to explain tasks or give other one-to-one support without disturbing the other students while they worked on their tasks. Not having to leave the main classroom physically while giving private individual support to students was a huge advantage to the teachers.

As mentioned by teachers in Romania and the UK, involving parents in their children's online lessons was important. Parents also said they benefitted from this as they got to know their children better.

The Greek teachers highlighted a potential disadvantage of online teaching: the missed opportunity for SEN students to be accepted by their peers in a classroom environment.

A further disadvantage noted by German teachers was that it could be harder to notice when SEN students started to fall behind.

3.5   Privacy and Personal Data Issues during Online Learning

Best Practice:

- Remove personal items, such as photos, from your background before teaching.

- Obtain consent from students and their parents before recording online lessons.

- Be clear on whether individual teachers need to obtain consent, or whether this is done centrally by the school.

- Give students and parents tips on how to protect their privacy online.

None of the participants had formal training on privacy and personal data issues before online teaching started. In Cyprus, teachers became aware of problems after parents expressed their concern about students having their cameras on. This ended with the Ministry of Education stating that students should keep their cameras off during online teaching, to avoid possible privacy-related issues. In Greece, teachers had to do a lot of their own research to know what they and students should do to protect their privacy. German teachers had to find their own courses on the topic, and sometimes ended up paying themselves.

Similarly with specific tools, German teachers found it was very time-consuming to examine every tool they planned to use for data security. They noted that many tools that are easily accessible and free to use, also have the most privacy and encryption issues, and are thus not useful at all in the educational context. It was a barrier for teachers if they had to inform parents of each tool used and gain consent.

Most issues with privacy arose because of teaching and learning being done in personal spaced. For example, teachers had to be careful not to show personal items such as photos in their camera background while teaching. Students might have issues such as a family disagreement happening behind them during class.

In some cases, students were given information about protecting their personal information online, which was seen as valuable. In Romania, at a later stage teachers had access to online platforms especially developed at the start of the first lockdown, for online safety during classes.

For all partners, permission to record was sought, but this was done either centrally by the school, or by teachers. No recordings were shared without permission from students and/or parents.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND EDUCATION POLICY MAKERS

☞ You may need to look at measures to combat technical issues such as lack of internet access at home, or lack of equipment – this may require funding at regional or national level, particularly in the case of access to e.g. laptops or tablets.

☞ If recruitment is down in physical or performance-based subjects (e.g. PE, music, drama), you may be able to reverse the trend by investing more time, effort and promotion in those subjects until numbers normalise.

☞ Each school should have an online teaching policy, shared with teachers, students and parents. This should set out the expectations for behaviour during online classes, and be explicit about new online-only rules that are not already part of standard classroom behaviour.

☞ At school level, encourage information sharing between teachers about good tools and activities for engagement and motivation.

☞ At regional and national level, set up systems to share the best practice gathered at each school.

☞ At regional, national or school level, set up training courses specifically around data sharing and privacy.

☞ At regional, national or school level, create separate guidance documents for students and parents, and for teachers, on how to protect their privacy during online teaching.

☞ At regional, national or school level, clarify what consent is needed before recording or sharing of online classes, and who will obtain consent (individual teachers or school administration).