



Academi Genedlaethol ar gyfer
Arweinyddiaeth Addysgol Cymru
National Academy for
Educational Leadership Wales

Words of wisdom - operation DRS 'School in the Sky'



Andrea is originally from Caerphilly and attended Aberystwyth University where she studied History and Welsh. She also attained her Post Graduate Certificate in Education whilst at Aberystwyth. Andrea also has a Master's in Educational Leadership and Management. She was the Assistant Head at Brynteg before she moved to work for the region as a Challenge Adviser and then the Strategic Lead for Teaching and Learning where she contributed to the early phase development of the National Approach to Professional Learning, Schools as a Learning Organisation with the OECD, as well as the regions approach to pedagogical practice in preparation for Curriculum for Wales. Andrea has also been an AS Level History examiner and has been a peer inspector for Estyn.

Andrea is currently the Vice Principal of Jiahui Oak Middle School and Academic Principal in Dalian Royal School, the affiliated High School of the Campus. During her 20 months in China, she has developed the school's International Pathway, leading the development of the academic programme, curriculum design and operating the day to day running of the school. She has also presented at international conferences on behalf of the school within China and has led and facilitated professional development sessions on the theme of 'Developing a Global Learning Culture'.

Nine weeks ago I boarded a flight to Vietnam to begin a month long, well overdue holiday. But on landing in the northern city of Hanoi, I had a sudden realisation that things weren't quite right in my second home of China. I was lucky! I left China as the news of the virus broke. I left the UK as the news spread of its ascendance in Europe. It is so surreal; the irony of the whole situation sends shivers down my spine. I really was lucky!

So, sharing my experiences with you over the last few months is no easy task. Why?

Where to begin? What to tell you? How to write it?

I went from travelling through Vietnam, seeing sites that I'd learnt about, to receiving 'Wechat' text from my team whilst sat on a beach in Thailand and all within 2 weeks of leaving China. I'd watched the situation unfold and I'd listened to colleagues and friends telling me 'it's bad' but thinking to myself it will all blow over soon enough. As the sun shone and I became sunburnt, I realised it wasn't going to blow over! **The first lesson learnt - this was serious. And it still is.**

And so, it began.

The couple of weeks before we went online were a blur of flights, jetlag, family time, friends time, 'wechats', emails and downloading every possible resource on the planet to help my students. We didn't really know what would happen, but my education

group started to prepare a platform for use by all their schools. But for High School, we were already using the Office 365 platform and various tools. Many of our students already use their Ipads for learning in the classroom so my view was 'why switch?' **So, I guess this is lesson number 2 - stick to what you know.** I wanted a platform that could allow our teachers to engage and interact with students. Office 365 provided this. I wanted a platform where teachers could use and integrate tools that would have the greatest impact on learning online; after all, we were preparing for IGCSE, AS and A Levels! Office365 provided this too. **So, lesson number 3 - don't forget your key principles of pedagogy.**

For me, relationships are always at the top and this was even more important now as some of our students had been in their homes for a long time. Additionally, we needed a mixed approach- online and offline, I've totally avoided the term 'blended' here or I could start an unintended debate!

Sounds so simple right? Wrong!

Lesson number 4 - don't assume! Plan, plan and plan again! We soon discovered issues of broadband, issues of connectivity and things we simply didn't know how to do! 56 networks of school TEAMS later, lots of videos on Youtube and tutorials on Microsoft Educator, we were ready! But still some connection issues so we decided we needed another way to interact with students just in case! As it happened, that 'just in case' became our most used method - 'ZOOM'. Together with Office 365, we decided we would stick to these!

Lesson number 5 - KISS! Keep it Simple Stupid! We had done so much research, we were saying 'we could use this and we could use that', but we needed to consider all the teachers and students. Even in the holidays, parents were already asking for support for exams. I hadn't anticipated this at all, but they were genuinely concerned. Teachers had already set homework for the holidays, but we decided to send some support in the form of 'DAILY CIRCUITS'. I guess in today's climate I would refer to this as 'asynchronous' learning as students could access the materials and work in a self-directed way. Did they do it? I have no real idea!



But throughout we have kept the same contact with parents. **Lesson number 6 - keep parents informed.** They are anxious, they are at home with their children when their children would normally be in school. And for this context, they were also there for evening self-study. We kept parents informed; we sent them guidance; we met with them online and took on board their concerns. We adjusted schedules; we supported students' revision and we individualised plans where it was needed. We operated very much as we would normally do but parents needed more from us than normal. The result? Parents are happy. Their support has been invaluable.

Key for me, and for all of us, are of course, our teachers. I was in the UK. Some were in South Korea. Some in South Africa. Some in the US you get my drift?

So back to **lesson number 4 - plan, plan and plan again!** We decided to keep our schedule the same as normal. Why? Routines, structures, take students' minds off things - it was needed after such a long break where our students had not been doing what they normally would do for the Spring festival. **Lesson 7- keep a routine;** maintain as much 'normality' as possible. With teachers across the world, connection issues and things like motivation, it all needed planning!

Planning was not only important for me, but for our teachers! I had set about my own learning sat on that beach in Thailand! To say I am a 'techno-dinosaur' is an understatement but soon I became a T-Rex- standing tall (unusual for a 5ft 2in me) and leading from the front. Friday 21st February was an important day. I'd sent out to staff some tutorials to do online in preparation. Did they do it? I have no idea! But I'd given them support. From 5am UK time to midday I sat in front of my computer and met with every department and leaders, outlining our plan and giving them the basic training of ZOOM, Office and some tools.

Remember lesson number 5 - KISS - it certainly was basic but on reflection I make no apologies for this; it was what was needed and, in some ways, still is.

Lesson number 8 - support your teachers with training and anything else they need - on and offline! As with all leaders, we are always supported by great teams around us. I used these wisely and my Education Service Centre team have provided the most unbelievable support to teachers. We've provided guidance, given technical support, even zoomed in and taken over lessons! I can now write teacher of English, PE and Economics on my CV! And our teacher team rose to the challenge! After 2.5 days of 16 hours working, frantic emails, 'wechats' and sorting technical issues (and it was a weekend), we launched!

Day 1

'my internet won't connect';
'students won't turn their cameras on';
'which students is in which group';
'my students can't access Teams'

And so on

114 messages in one group! Oh boy! What was to come? This was the 'storm before the calm'. What was now needed? Lesson 9 - make sure you have some online etiquette and rules for message and emails and then there was calm.

Fast forward March 20th 2020. End of week 4 online. 800 lessons, including PE, tutor groups and University counsellor sessions; 95-99% average attendance; 33 committed teachers; online parent meeting; online student voice meeting; same normal leadership meetings weekly; academic meetings weekly; meetings with all teachers; sharing of practice articles from teachers; continued professional development; regular homework and so on... and of course, mock exams online next week! Phew!

Lesson 10 - look after your own and others wellbeing!

#stayhealthy; #staysafe; #stayintouch