

St Philip's Christian College DALE and DALE Young Parents

Digital practices to support learning

September 2021



About the Case Studies

The 2020 remote teaching period highlighted the need for educators to develop a broad and inclusive set of digital practices to support student learning. Their approaches needed to enable learning across formal spaces (physical and virtual) such as classrooms and learning management systems, as well as home learning environments. Educators also needed to cater for the needs and circumstances of all students, including those with additional needs, and those with home technology access or connectivity limitations.

This case study is part of a broader research project seeking to understand teachers' effective and inclusive digital pedagogies, as well as emerging digital practices during and after the period of remote teaching. It is seeking to uncover effective digital practices, and the factors that influenced their successful implementation. Together these will assist in informing next practices with digital technologies across a range of diverse school contexts.

About St Philip's Christian College (SPCC) DALE and DALE Young Parents

St Philip's Christian College (SPCC) spans six schools and caters for students from Pre-Kindergarten to Tertiary Learning. This case study concerns two of those schools – SPCC DALE and SPCC DALE Young Parents.

This was the fourth case study in this project, with data collected during Term 2, 2021. Data were collected through virtual interviews and focus groups. Artefacts, including student work samples and school policies, were also collected

SPCC DALE is a Dynamic Alternative Learning Environment for students with disabilities in Years 3 – 12. This special needs school is located in Newcastle and caters for students who have a diagnosis of anxiety, depression, PTSD, or autism.

SPCC DALE Young Parents is an accredited special assistance school for young parents. It has two campuses located in Newcastle and the Central Coast, NSW, providing flexible learning environments for stages 4 to 6 to any young parents. There is onsite early learning and care for their babies whilst they study.



St Philip's Christian College (SPCC) Case Study Data Collection

- **School leader focus group:** 30 minute focus group with Brant Maslen, SPCC DALE special needs school, and Wendy Gerakios, SPCC DALE Young Parents school
- **Teacher interviews:** 30 minute interviews with four teachers - 2 teachers from each school
- **Student focus groups:** Two 30 minute student focus groups - 1 group from each school (5 students per group)

School Context

As special needs and special assistance schools, student connection, wellbeing and personalising learning were core priorities that underpinned the schools' decisions during the remote teaching period. Although these priorities underpin the schools' everyday practices in normal times, the challenge was to adapt digital practices that worked for the remote teaching period.

A transition to a school learning management system was being implemented just prior to the remote teaching period, and training was expedited as a result. Students' digital access differed markedly between the two schools. SPCC DALE students had already been assigned their own laptops before the pandemic and were able to take these home. Students at SPCC DALE Young Parents are not assigned computers. The school used a range of approaches to support and communicate with the students including emails, phone calls, zoom sessions and dropping off packs with hard copies of paperwork and resources to their homes.

Key Insights

“Our core values, and what underpins what we do as specialist assistance schools, didn't change. If we tried 'to be something that we weren't' in that remote environment, it wouldn't have worked.”

(Wendy, School Leader Focus Group)

School priorities for the remote teaching period

Maintaining student wellbeing.

“Our core values, and what underpins what we do as specialist assistance schools, didn't change. If we tried 'to be something that we weren't' in that remote environment, it wouldn't have worked” (Wendy, School Leader Focus Group).

As special needs and special assistance schools, the main priority for the remote teaching period was connection and wellbeing. Caring for the students, their families, and combatting isolation was the focus in both the DALE and DALE Young Parents contexts and underpinned the schools' decisions and strategies during the remote teaching period.

Providing flexibility and individualised approaches.

Another priority for both schools was flexibility, and personally tailored approaches to learning that are adapted to students' needs. Teachers focused on meeting the needs of individual students and also on creating individual learning plans and solutions based on their students' level of digital access.

“We would see a student had a problem, and then ask, 'how are we going to adjust to make the curriculum accessible to them'?” (DALE Young Parents Visual Arts Teacher, Interview).

Ensuring core values informed whole-school decisions.

Core values informed the strategic decisions made by both schools during the remote learning period. They were mindful of being special needs or special assistance environments. The staff realised that if they tried to duplicate a 'normal' school day, that they were only going to cause stress for students, families, and staff. Modifications were made to prioritise essential learning and provide flexibility.

Key factors affecting remote teaching practices

Staff collegiality enhanced staff wellbeing and provided support.

“It has everything to do with the communication, the problem-solving. I think good team collaboration was the key for us. It happened daily, so it wasn’t just a once a week check-in, it was ‘alright, what are we doing today?’” (DALE Young Parents Visual Arts Teacher, Interview).

Staff met daily over zoom to share experiences, reduce any anxiety, and solve unexpected challenges. These connections, along with the strong pre-existing relationships between staff were seen as contributing to the school’s success with remote learning.

Staff collaborative problem-solving enabled positive solutions to challenges.

Teachers shared ideas and resources for their sessions during daily debriefs, as well as possible approaches for engaging students and parents online. School leaders were proud of this aspect of their success along with the subsequent peer learning amongst staff.

“We realised what it was about, and how we worked on solutions was the thing we should be most proud of... There was collective learnings and ‘collective sharings’ as a professional learning group” (Brant, School Leader, Focus Group).

Innovative hybrid teaching approaches supported simultaneous on campus and remote teaching.

“So essentially we were offering dual learning, but 90% of the kids were at home” (Stage 6 DALE Teacher, Interview).

The school adopted a hybrid ‘dual delivery’ approach which allowed staff to walk around the classroom and have the camera follow them. The teaching became more interactive than just using a computer with a camera pointed to a whiteboard, which the staff felt would lead to disengagement by remote students. Their hybrid approach also provided peer interactions between students on campus and at home.

Effective digital practices during the remote teaching period

Providing continuity of learning through effective use of the Learning Management System.

Students at SPCC DALE could access all their learning and assessment tasks through their learning management system (iLearn) class page. This included working with literacy and numeracy support staff in break out rooms where relevant. As one teacher observed: **“it was actually continuity of education, there was no break in their education”** (Year 8 DALE Teacher, Interview).

Assisting students through explicit teaching practices and scaffolded instructions.

A range of strategies were used to scaffold student learning at SPCC DALE to ensure students could access learning with confidence. The learning management system was a central part of this process, as well as the use of video. Additional visual cues were included as a supplement to verbal and written instructions to provide students with autism with further support.

Using participatory online class discussions to support learning and connection.

“I feel like we got more discussion in that particular [Literacy] lesson than what I probably would have got if we were in the classroom setting. Whether they just felt a bit safer being behind their screens, and being able to talk, I don’t know. In class they wouldn’t want to be that focus of attention so wouldn’t talk. Over Zoom, they could talk and still not be the focus of attention.” (Stage 6 DALE Teacher, Interview)

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(DALE Young Parents English and Art Teacher, Interview)

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(Brant, School Leader Focus Group)

Being physically located in their more familiar and secure home environment, DALE students felt more comfortable participating in class discussions. Students participated in these virtual discussions with more enthusiasm because they could turn their cameras off, reducing attention to themselves and feeling 'safer' to discuss and share ideas.

Using technologies to enable practical lessons.

SPCC DALE Young Parents teachers embraced the chaos of their home environments and used the available technologies to enable practical lessons. One English and Art Teacher described an art session as **"...comical but it was actually quite fun, trying to do a practical art lesson via Zoom. I had 15 students and there were 15 little children in the screen as well. I was proud of that lesson because I think all the students at the end of it were laughing ... That was probably the way I looked at 'success' at that time: if my students were able to engage and laugh in a very bleak time."** (DALE Young Parents English and Art Teacher, Interview)

Providing a balance of guided and self-paced activities.

Both schools worked towards a balance of guided and self-paced activities. This looked different for each. Teachers at DALE Young Parents worked on building their students' capacity to learn more independently, as they were accustomed to having one-on-one support. DALE Teachers were conscious of excessive screen time, so they also emphasised more self-paced, 'off-screen' activities, including morning movement sessions. Students remembered this as a positive. **"We still did our - we call it morning movement - so we still did exercise and everybody would have to get up on the camera, do jumping jacks, stretching"** (DALE student, Focus Group).

Strategies to improve digital literacy and confidence.

The students became more digitally literate and confident during the period of remote teaching. Teachers saw an increase in problem solving abilities and a willingness for students to work things out for themselves. Teachers also became more confident in their digital skills, and their ability to find solutions to technical problems.

Practices to support student inclusion

Offering a clearly structured dual delivery mode.

Keeping students connected with peers was considered crucial. Digital technologies were used to enable this two-way connection ensuring students could stay in contact with peers, irrespective of where they were learning.

"We didn't call it remote learning, we called it, for DALE, dual delivery, so that those students could be here, and the dual delivery mode could still keep them connected" (Brant, School Leader Focus Group).

Adoption of creative strategies to address digital access challenges.

Students at SPCC DALE Young Parents had limited digital access, so staff had to be creative and adopt multi-faceted approaches during the remote teaching period. Phones were a primary tool for learning and communication, along with printed work packs and recording Zooms because synchronous learning was often challenging for parents with young children at home.

Adoption of strategies to assist families and carers.

Differing levels of digital literacies impacted on the learning of DALE students. IT were available, and the school shared short training videos to help families support their children to navigate the new Learning Management System (iLearn).

“As a mum you’re already isolated, ... your whole life revolves around being a mother. So being able to keep in touch with people, and getting your mental health on track, ... just keeping in contact with your teachers and friends would be the biggest part of my experience.”

(DALE Young Parents Student Focus Group)

Approaches to support staff and student wellbeing

The ongoing focus at both the DALE schools on student and staff wellbeing saw many practices continue or be enhanced during the remote teaching period. For staff, frequent communication helped provide support in relation to their practice, but also more generally. It also helped to embed the early digital upskilling in relation to the technologies the school was using to facilitate learning.

For students, wellbeing assistants played a significant role, with check-ins for both students and families. Teachers were focused on implementing enjoyable activities. They felt that doing so would help their students feel comfortable with remote teaching, so they could stay motivated and come back the next day. They were also aware of the importance of students maintaining their social networks and explored different ways to encourage peer interactions. These connections were valued by all students.

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Student Wellbeing Strategies

- Wellbeing assistants provided important additional support for students and families.
- Regular wellbeing checks provided individualised and targeted support.
- Activities were designed for learning and maintaining student social networks.
- Engagement was supported through incorporating games and fun activities.
- Setting realistic workload expectations

Practices continuing beyond school lockdown period

Continued use of learning management system to support a hybrid (dual delivery) approach.

The learning management system is now fully embedded within the school and considered particularly useful for students who need to be learning at home, for whatever reason. This is a frequent occurrence in both schools due to a variety of complex student needs. Having a centralised space has reduced the volume of emails, helped students stay connected and facilitated their connection and engagement with peers, irrespective of learning location.

“There is the option if you are away, like to Zoom call if you do need help, or need to talk to the teacher. We didn’t do that before.” student focus group)

“I broke my ankles and I was off school for a little bit, so it was good to be able to have that option to Zoom in with the teachers whenever.” (DALE student focus group)

Future planning to maximise beneficial effects of remote learning for some students.

Teachers found that a number of students whose attendance was quite low prior to COVID, were more engaged than what they were previously. They also observed some DALE students working more effectively at home during the remote teaching. The school is now considering how they can use these observations to benefit the learning of these students’ post-pandemic.

Improved wellbeing systems maintained.

The DALE schools have kept many of the wellbeing check-in procedures that were a feature of the remote school lockdown period. Staff at both schools believed they were more united as a staff, and benefited from the opportunity to collaborate in new ways with colleagues: **“we created connections with people that perhaps we hadn’t really had the opportunity to create connections with before”** (Year 8 DALE Teacher, Interview).

Ongoing use of virtual teacher professional learning opportunities.

The period of remote teaching was seen as having a beneficial effect on teachers’ professional learning. Staff members now take advantage of virtual professional learning opportunities that otherwise would have been impossible to access due to time or travel costs.

“We didn’t panic, and we understood the value of learning that’s not just on a written page, all the different learning that goes on in life, and just kept to seeing the bigger picture.”

(Wendy, School Leader Focus Group)

Participants’ recommendations and lessons learned

Maintain student connection and engagement through enjoyable activities.

“We didn’t panic, and we understood the value of learning that’s not just on a written page, all the different learning that goes on in life, and just kept to seeing the bigger picture.” (Wendy, School Leader Focus Group)

It was very important to the teachers to maintain student engagement. They believed that if students stayed connected to their learning and peers, that when they came back to school they would still feel connected to their class. The teachers found that having the ability to connect with the students, in whatever way they creatively could, both sustained the students and the teachers as well.

Separate work and home life to support wellbeing

The advice from the teachers was that, should they be in that situation again, they would put more structure into their day to provide a delineation between school time and family time. They believed this would work to overcome the feeling there was no clear distinction between work and home, and to reduce the change of making phone calls and doing check-ins far beyond normal working hours.

Ensure effective training to elevate staff confidence.

During the remote teaching period in 2020, there was an air of uncertainty that created worry and stress. Being well trained in the technologies and systems to enable effective teaching was viewed as countering this to some degree. Should schools have to return to a period of remote learning, the staff feels that they would approach it more confidently as a result.

