



How the technically advanced WMG Academy benefited from Google Classroom to evolve their method of teaching during the Coronavirus lockdown

The Background

WMG Academy Coventry and WMG Academy Solihull are University Technical Colleges specialising in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths. Both academies offer qualifications including GCSE, BTEC and A-level for students aged 14-19 with an interest in STEM subjects. Partnered with the University of Warwick, as well as local, national and global companies, the academies offer a careers' focussed education to help students reach their potential both during their years at the academies and beyond.

WMG Academy Coventry is close to the University of Warwick campus, and WMG Academy Solihull is not far from the Jaguar Land Rover plants, and it is no surprise that JLR is one of their key industrial partners. WMG Academy Coventry has 400 pupils and Solihull has 350 – both of which are growing.

WMG Academy has worked with RM as its technology partner from its inception, almost six years ago. RM is seen as a key partner in the delivery of teaching and learning, both inside and outside the classroom, providing a Managed Service Contract via its Flex Service. This has proved cost effective as the Academies have been able to increase their on-site requirements during their initial growth period.

“RM has assisted us in delivering world class technology to our students, teachers and administration staff. Our reliance on technology is heavy, as our courses require large amounts of 'typed' work to be submitted as well as engineering drawing and modelling. Pretty much every lesson delivered involves IT”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

The WMG Academies' objective is to make IT delivery strategic. That way, it is always in the background, albeit never far away.

“IT should support our teaching and learning and not get in the way of it. Our staff and students should find IT efficient and helpful, not a stumbling block! RM has helped us deliver this vision, by supporting our strategy and growing their Service, across both of our Academies”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

Responding to the challenge

Like most schools and academies, WMG Academy Coventry stayed open throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, for their most vulnerable students, and 3 to 9 students attended each day. The remainder were taught remotely, with their safeguarding team conducting daily and weekly checks by phoning home, to ensure those students were safe and well. Following the Government announcements that Years 10 and 12 could return to school in 'bubbles' they re-opened to all students in those year groups and recorded extremely high attendance rates across both academies.

As a relatively new group, technology had always been at the heart of the academies, so their journey to the cloud was set out on day one (six years ago). Three years on they elected to channel their online resources towards Google, and the transition was smooth and they have been nurturing their cloud strategy ever since. As such, when the lockdown came in March 2020, Google Classroom was already in widespread use, albeit sporadic in its overall usage level. Nevertheless, teaching staff had all received training and were already experienced and familiar with the use of Google Apps.

That said, when the announcement came, they were no more prepared than other schools – largely due to the speed at which the lockdown was initiated– but unlike many of those other schools, the tools that WMG Academies were already using lent themselves to immediate remote learning.

"Our prior decision to go this way paid dividends, so that in that last week all we had to do was train our staff on the use of Google Meet and provide students with the opportunity to try it out before we finally closed the school".

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager



It is obvious that this was a sensible decision, as they have managed to continue with professional development and training throughout lockdown, and have seen good statistical outputs that clearly demonstrate that their teaching and learning is continuing at pace.

"We haven't stopped! We have taken the pandemic in our stride and just evolved the way we teach – our purpose remains the same".

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager



Practical implications of remote learning

In general, the staff, students and parents at the WMG Academies have embraced working remotely. Whilst it does not suit everyone, and – as you would expect – some have thrived and some have struggled – WMG Academies are proud with the support network they have put in place for staff and students.

"Success for us has been in ensuring our staff and students can work and continue to work. If they have to stop because the IT failed, we have failed".

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager



Their weekly online staff briefings have become a highlight of the week and take place over Google Meet, and they record the briefings for those who need to catch up later.

The technologies they have in place mean they can communicate with staff and students in a secure environment – an important part of keeping students safe. Staff record all their student video meetings to ensure they can meet safeguarding requirements.

"We have held over 1,500 Google Meetings since lockdown".

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager



Engaging with students has largely gone well, with appreciation right across the board – especially from many parents. It has also set the tone for where they go from here.

"When we first started our Academy, there was a vision that students would be able to bring their own devices into the Academy and use them freely. Every student has a smartphone and therefore every student has access to our cloud technology. We have the ability to secure communication to the device, through a security policy, so we know we can communicate safely and with everybody".

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

And the biggest challenge? Simply not being able to see people in person.

Prior to the pandemic, [RM undertook research that concluded that many teachers were reluctant to see greater technology in schools](#). Whilst the WMG Academies are more technologically advanced than most, there was a feeling of that here too, albeit now with a firm belief that the lockdown has changed that view significantly, recognising that there is more still to do.

“We could do with six weeks to train staff fully and assemble a year’s worth of online resources. The easier we can make the technology the better. Over-complicated technologies do not get a second chance in our academies”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

Teachers, like everyone, have their own unique ways of teaching, styles and personalities. IT must enable these unique characteristics to flourish – it’s their individuality that makes them good teachers. IT systems ‘want’ everyone and everything to be the same. That’s why they work! To be successful you have to layer the approach. If everyone understands that, you have progress and can persuade teachers to use and adopt IT to their benefit, otherwise it’s useless.

For WMG Academies, having a reliable partner supporting them has been key – both in terms of coping with the unknown each day, but also in preparing them for the future.

“We have a great RM engineer allocated to our account to look after the day-to-day issues. The wider RM team underpins that support, both on short term issues and the longer term strategy. The full RM team has a good understanding of our expectations and are therefore able to help us every step of the way”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

Remote learning should not be something that is seen as a completely different set of IT technologies and skills. Teachers and students have been working at home for many years (teachers prepping, students doing homework) – it has just been a little more intense during the lockdown, and somewhat more in the spotlight.

The Lessons Learnt

- 1. Develop a coherent IT strategy** that supports the values of teaching and learning. You cannot formulate a strategy overnight. If you have a cohesive IT strategy, you will have migrated to the cloud already, and that’s the key. If you don’t already have that in place, you may have to wait for the next pandemic!
- 2. Have technology that works, is simple to use, is backed by fast and easy to access support, and where the benefits of the technology are tangible.** With all of these in place, staff and students will feel comfortable trying new things and see technology as an enabler rather than a barrier that they need to overcome
- 3. Demonstrate resilience.** Whilst no-one predicted the pandemic, those establishments who were able to take it in their stride are those who have adapted the best, and been able to deliver the more seamless form of education during the lockdown

4. **Have a reliable partner.** Having someone to turn to – who understands the technology, who appreciates the unique challenges of operating in an education environment, and who has strength in depth when it is needed, are the key to releasing a school or academy to operate as normally as they can.

“Whilst a local tech company may be cheaper, they are just that – tech support – they can rarely advise on IT strategy, and ‘tech support’ implies a reactive response to something that has gone wrong, when what you really need is someone who is proactively fixing things before that happens”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

The Legacy

Whilst no-one knows what schools will be like in the future, there is a high likelihood that we will never return to what we would previously described as ‘normal’. We will learn to live with it, but the fundamental institutionalised approach to education will change.

What is clear is that most organisations that have undertaken some form of remote learning during the lockdown share a common view that will enable them to push more use of technology in all of their lesson planning.

For students at WMG Academies, who are all older (14 years plus), a blended approach to learning, more akin to a University style self-study approach may well be the answer.

“I would hope that the lockdown has demonstrated that the technology does work, we have it, and it can support a blended style of teaching and learning. The pressure on our buildings and in-house IT infrastructure could potentially be relieved by having less students and staff in at any one time”.

Graham Jacklin, Facilities and IT Manager

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