

Embracing the challenge of online education

EC English has a long history of experimentation with online learning, so when the Coronavirus crisis hit, they had ideas on how to progress. EC's partnership with GEL is long-standing. They started using GEL in 2010, stopped to go their own way in 2012, and re-engaged in 2014. They have been working closely with GEL ever since. Gillian Davidson, EC's Group Academic Director, spoke to us about the process they went through in setting up their online school, EC Virtual.

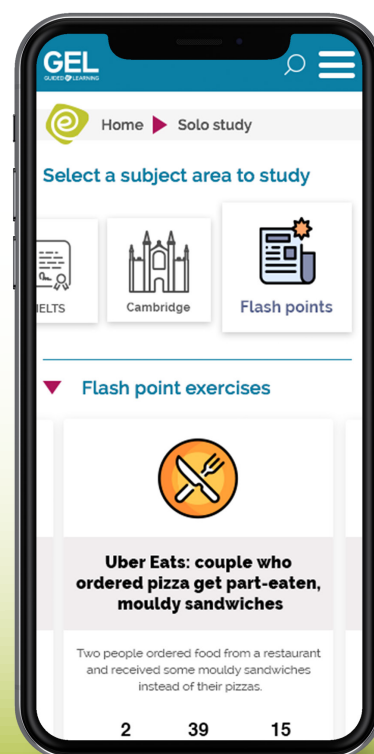
Don't be afraid to change. Figure out what works.

When Covid-19 hit, EC moved very quickly to convert to an entirely online programme. However, from the beginning Gill understood that to go anywhere they needed to demonstrate real quality. *"There was a lot of trial and error initially-we were working to a very tight time-frame. However, our group had experience with online learning and we had much of our academic programme already on GEL. All of this told us that for a system to be effective it could not be a tick-box alternative to being in the school."*

The EC team had to trust their experience. *"There was a lot of pressure to replicate in-school lesson structure online. In particular, some competitors were offering 3 hours of lessons per day and so we were under pressure to do the same. Our experience, however, told us that in an online setting, its more challenging for the teacher to maintain student energy levels beyond 45 minutes. We had to convince people that for online to be effective, we needed to adapt the lesson structure."*

Flipped Classroom Quality

The Academic team formed a basic plan on how to run an online course. *"Our course has 4 parts: a flipped classroom prepares students for the video lesson, collaboration after the lesson to consolidate learning and self-study. The video lessons have to be shorter. We run a lesson for 45 minutes, take a break and then another 45 minutes. Collaboration is where students work together and produce language. They work both synchronously and asynchronously and are monitored by their teacher. The flipped classroom makes the video class and collaboration effective. We provide pre- and post-tasks which may be reading, exercises or video."* GEL provides infrastructure and content for the flipped classroom and the self-study and this has proved critical to winning over students. *"Lots of students, particularly those that are less confident, like the flipped classroom because they can prepare for lessons at their own space and come to class feeling more confident."*



Scaling up

Once they worked out the approach, Gill and her team needed to tool-up to deliver the courses. The first step was creating the virtual school. *"We already had our syllabus, learning aims, progress assessments and dashboards online with GEL, so we were in a good starting position. Instead of each of our centres having their own instance of GEL, we created one virtual school with 24-hour staffing, making use of our global spread of teachers. Classes run at every level every 4 hours. Students sign up to the time-zone of their choice each week. We also run online social programmes with Netflix parties, quizzes and free lessons."* We asked Gill if students could easily switch time zone. *"Creating a community online is really important so our students have to sign up to a particular time zone for a week. During that time, they are collaborating with their class and getting to know their teacher, so they tend to stay."* With the virtual school set up, EC worked with National Geographic to switch to a digital course book and choose Microsoft Teams as their virtual classroom. There were now almost ready to begin!



Maintaining Quality

Gill emphasised the importance of training staff and monitoring progress. Part of GEL's role is to maintain consistency in teaching and monitor progress in classes and students. *"Teaching online is not the same as teaching in a class and it is often a new learning environment for teachers and students alike. Virtual classrooms need to be highly structured."* With classes every 4 hours and students able to move, consistency is as critical. Gill also highlighted that *"clear learning goals and success criteria are critical."* GEL dashboards provide insight into how well teachers are following the course structure and how students are progressing. Gill also pointed out that tools like Microsoft Teams made it easier to run observations with teachers from all time zones.

Success and growing

It's working! EC are *"delighted that a significant percentage of students continued their courses online, and with the high volume of remote sign ups we are getting."* However, it has been and continues to be hard work. *"There was a lot of student pushback in the beginning because of the shorter classes, but that died down quickly once students experienced the smaller classes and new programme."* She also pointed out that *"There is still work to do. Monitoring data is absolutely vital to our success and there is still more in GEL that we are bringing over from our in-school implementation."* We asked Gill about what she views as the key factors in their success. *"The critical part is offering a quality product and communicating this clearly to the market. Our goal isn't to replicate what we've previously delivered in our face-to-face schools and offer that online. That will fail. Our goal is to take advantage of our organisation and experience to develop the best online course available, a course that provides students with an international learning experience, in their own home and communicate that to our students and agents."*