Transitioning to a Virtual Learning Platform: Google Classroom

Why did we go for Google Classroom?

With the daily announcements in the news and talks of an imminent UK lockdown, we decided to look into the use of online learning. As a school we were only using the school website to communicate with parents and children and thus had little experience with this approach to learning but were adamant that we wanted to be able to continue to deliver the best learning experiences to the children.

Following discussions online on a number of social platforms and taking advice from our Computing teacher, Phil Bagge, we opted for Google Classroom. It seemed to be regularly recommended for primary settings and as a junior school it was clear that others in the profession felt this was a suitable platform for children of this age.

Getting started with Google Classroom

The first time we shared the platform with staff, many found it daunting and there were initial feelings of 'the younger children will not be able to cope'. To calm anxieties and concerns, we immediately came together as a staff and had a quick 'How to Navigate the Basics' training session led by Phil Bagge and supported by ourselves in our new role as Google Classroom Leaders. Sharing video links and modelling what we deemed essential, staff experimented with the platform and quickly adapted and became familiar with the minimum it could do. Like anything with computing, experience is key and this opportunity was invaluable. The staff, after just one hour of training, felt more reassured, and even energised by the new opportunities this would allow. We had also reminded ourselves of the important fact, that children are often much more flexible and welcoming to new technology and change than ourselves.

What did we deem 'The Basics'?

- How to log on and add people to a class
- How to assign different types of task
- How to post and comment to children

During this session we also made the school decision to not allow children email access or the ability to post. We deemed this as non-essential to their learning and felt it would help to manage workload and support well-being while keeping content appropriate.

Introducing it to the children

On the Thursday before school closure, each child was guided through the logging on process: children were shown how to join their class (either by invitation or by class code) and where to find assignments and the class stream. At this stage, all children were set identical passwords and encouraged to change these to something memorable later on . A letter was then sent home providing a brief overview and the child's login information. For those children already self-isolating, this was delivered to their home along with other school resources to enable them access.

From the Monday of school closure, the vast majority of children were now online and the two of us, as appointed members of staff, were available in school to solve home access issues during the initial transition period.

## What we have learnt along the way and what we would do differently

Logging on Issues: Encouraging parents to click on the initial icon in the top right to check the original user of the device is not already logged in (and stopping the child from accessing their account) has helped reduce logging on problems.
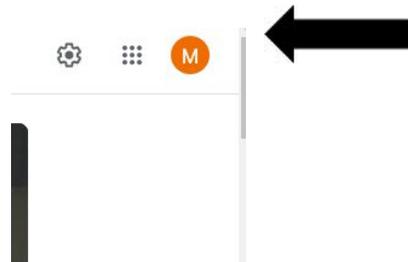
Scheduling Assignments: Scheduling assignments has allowed us to effectively plan ahead and ensure all classes are receiving their learning at the same time.
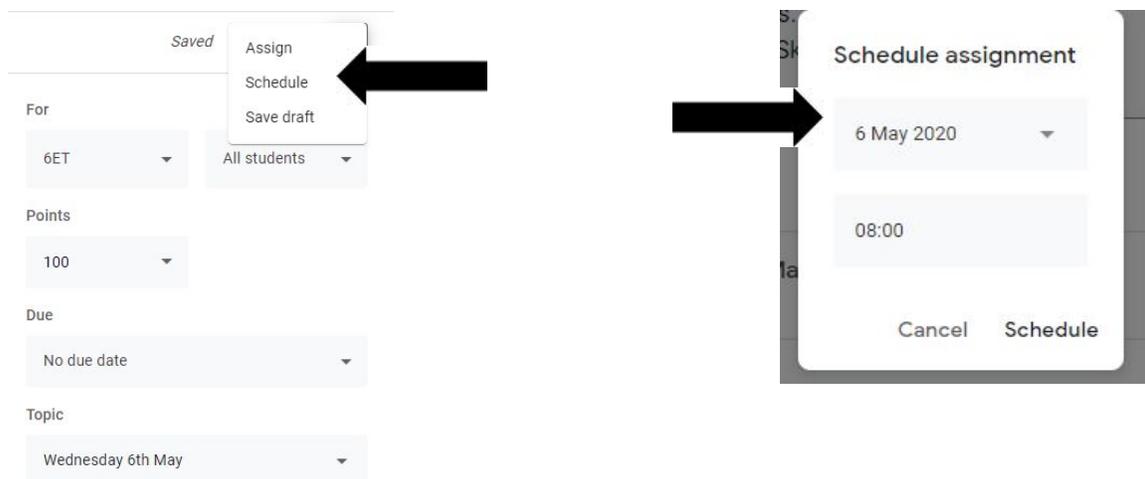
Providing Video Support: With limited time to prepare and model its use to the children, setting up a Google Classroom Help class has allowed us to be able to post material links and videos that demonstrate to the children how to use various features.
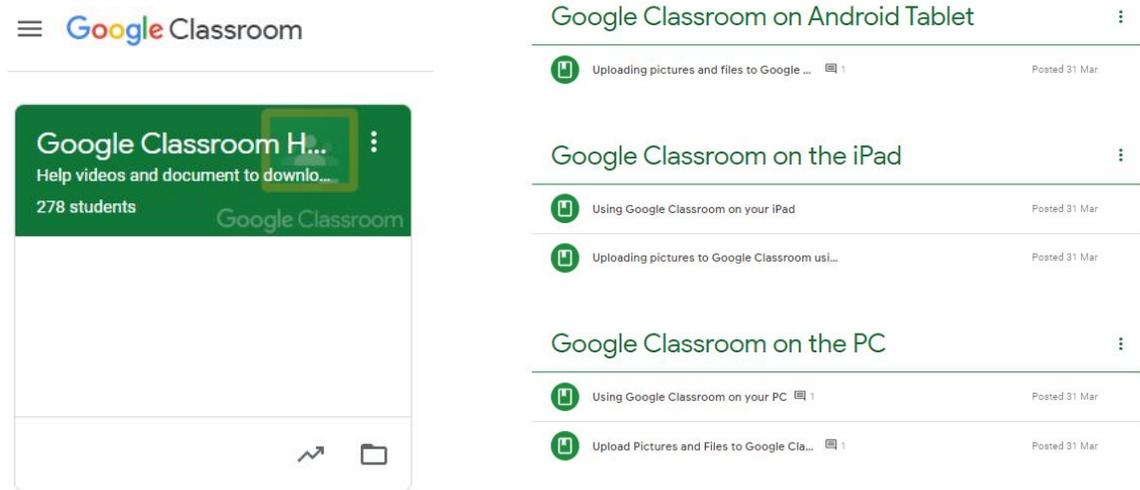
File types: When posting assignments, staff were initially attaching resources in Word and Powerpoint formats which worked for most, but not all. Therefore, deciding to convert all documents to either PDF, Google Doc or Google Slides has allowed us to ensure accessibility on all devices.

Self Grading Quiz assignments: When posting quiz assignments we realised it is possible for children's grades to be imported from the quiz rather than by teachers manually. This saves a lot of time. To be able to do this, staff ensure that the option for Grade Importing is selected on the assignment page and that in the settings section of the quiz, email addresses are collected. It is important to note that for this to work, the quiz must be the only attachment to a particular assignment.

3
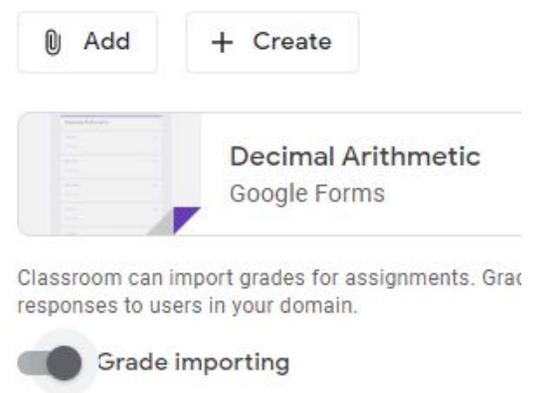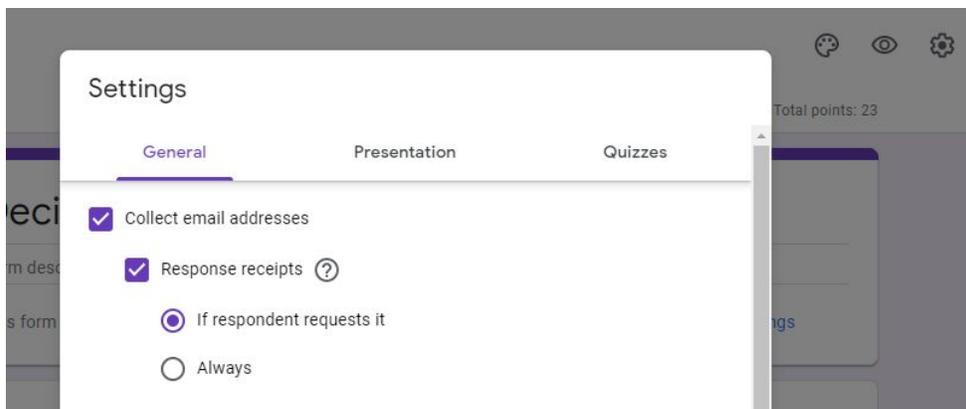
Keeping Google Drive Storage Available: Setting up a school Youtube account has allowed us to share our created videos online without actually uploading them, allowing us to keep our storage on Google Drive for resources and documents. Adding youtube links is easy and they appear embedded in the Google Classroom page. All videos are posted as Unlisted on Youtube and so they are not publicly findable.

Test Account: Setting up a test child account and adding them to each class has allowed us to be able to log in and see assignments from the child's perspective.

Staff Posting Content: Allowing all staff access to each class has meant that every teacher can post to all classes. This has allowed a variety of posts and communication which children have greatly appreciated.

Using Google Classroom alongside other learning platforms

Alongside Google Classroom, we also use other learning sites such as Reading Plus, Mathletics and TTRockstars. To make sure that these are still accessed and in the forefront of children's minds, we created a topic which signposted children to other learning websites. This has then been added to, as new sites have been made available, for example, content on Audible and audio stories on author's own websites.

How the children have responded

Overall, the children have responded very well to the use of Google Classroom. Through the responses they made on a recent school survey, it is clear that children have enjoyed being able to interact with their peers and their teachers and that they have welcomed the variety of different assignments that have been posted. Children have commented that using Google Classroom has allowed them to learn at their own pace more than they are able to in school, which they have found positive. The instant feedback that is gained from quiz assignments, has also been motivating.

Expectations and Monitoring of Google Classroom

As a school, clear guidelines and expectations have been set to ensure equitable and appropriate learning opportunities are being provided. Through parent feedback and with well-being and work life balance a priority, we decided on the following:

● Year groups set three lessons a day (Maths, English, Project)
● Lessons are scheduled for/or posted at 8am each school day.
● Teachers are to monitor classes daily offering support when required.

- Teachers are to mark/feedback where appropriate.
- Teachers are not to post or set lessons during weekends and holidays.

How have we adapted to meet the needs of individuals?

We have been very mindful about the needs of individuals and have offered additional support in a number of ways:

- By providing laptops to children to allow easy and regular access to learning.
- Through regular phone calls during the initial transition, talking children through logging on and navigating the site and follow up calls throughout.
- By linking additional resources and support when required.
- By recommending the use of the Voice Typing tool on Google Docs/Slides to allow less able writers or children with SEND or language needs to dictate their work rather than type and therefore access their learning more independently.
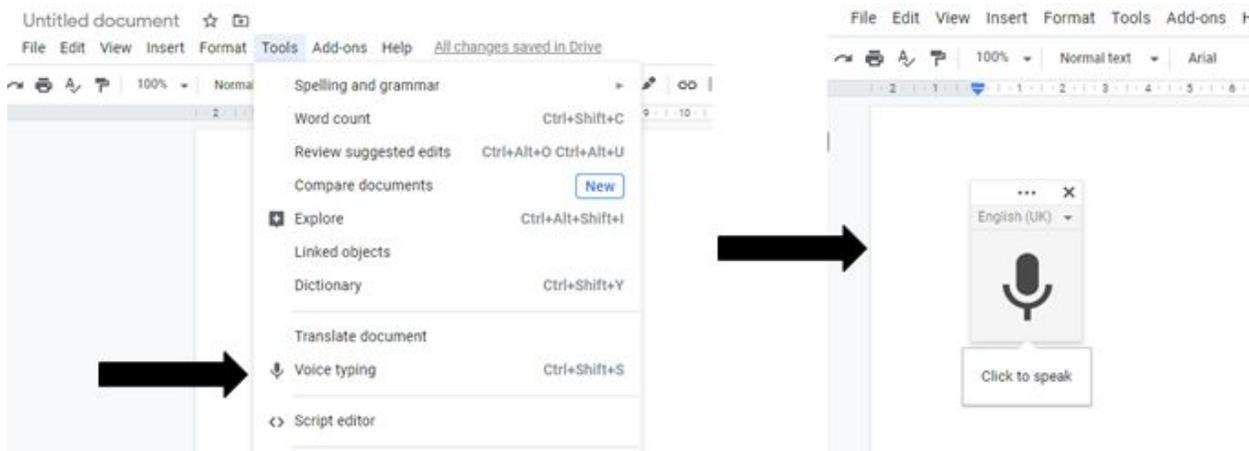
- By setting up group chats (as a material/assignment) to support social and emotional needs, allowing children the opportunity to use Google Classroom as a platform for socialising as well as a tool for learning: letting them post freely amongst close friends.
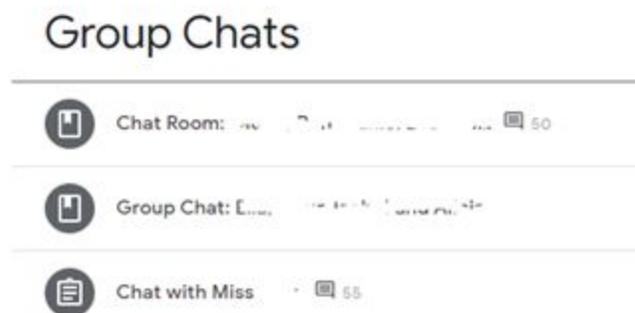
We are now also at a stage where we are monitoring individual pupil groups and their involvement to ensure attainment is maintained.

Parent Feedback

Parents have been incredibly supportive of our new approach to learning. We have had many emails,letters and thanks from parents of children both working from home and in school. The initial setup and instant transition received very positive feedback as valuable learning experiences were accessible from day one of closure and teachers were online and offering support. Feedback has also indicated that the Classroom Help videos have encouraged independence and allowed the platform to be easily accessed and navigated.

Senior leaders have valued the opportunity to deliver key messages and celebrate successes through videos and messages to all the classes, bringing the school community together. Parents have also praised us for this, stating that it provides familiarity to the children and eases anxieties.We are now hoping to extend this to include more face-to-face contact involving the wider staff community.

How will we use this platform going forward post lockdown

The opportunities that Google Classroom provides continues to surprise us daily and we feel we are still only just scratching the surface with the potential it has. In the future we hope to continue to use the platform to drive learning forward and allow it to go beyond the classroom walls. We envisage it being used to set weekly homework tasks, provide learning for ongoing projects and to celebrate learning, as well as being a central location for key dates and reminders.

Not only will the use of Google Classroom reduce the need for continuous photocopying and printing (moving us to a more economical way of working), but our hopes are that it will primarily benefit health and well-being of both our staff and children: reducing the amount of time staff need to prepare physical resources and allowing children an opportunity to feel part of our daily school community and maintain learning even when they are not in school.

Final Words

Sally-Ann Evans, Headteacher, has been delighted with the introduction of google classroom as an online learning platform and commented that "this will change the way we set home-learning in the future. Having dedicated staff who have been committed to this initiative has been crucial, as well as being able to draw on the expertise of Phil Bagge who had the vision and provided vital training, ably supported every step of the way by our key teachers, Emily and Simon, has been integral to its success. "

Emily Tagg and Simon Blake
Ringwood Junior School
Google Classroom Leaders