Cambridge Assessment International Education

Screen time for learners: Making sense of the evidence and applying it in the classroom

There is understandable concern over the amount of screen time learners have had this year. We know that schools are looking for reliable guidance on managing this. Research suggests that the focus should be on how screen time is used, rather than on how much screen time learners are getting.

What does the evidence say?

Research on healthy screen time is ongoing, and inconclusive. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) in the UK does not issue time limits for screen access. This is because 'evidence is weak…the evidence of harm is often overstated…and the majority of the literature that does exist looks only at television screen time.'[1]

However, existing research draws out some important factors to consider:

- It depends on the type of screen time. Passively looking at screens for long periods is probably damaging. Participating in online classes or social time is probably beneficial.
- It also depends on the relationship between screen time and other activities. If, for instance, students are replacing sleep or exercise with screen time, that is a problem. The impact of this can be on both academic achievement and health.
- The impact varies for different age ranges. For very young children, passive screen time should be limited, because of the impact on their development.
- It is easy to see the problem as children having too much access to tablets, computers and the internet. However, lack of access to computers is also likely to cause problems, and is an issue for children and young people living in poverty.

Your experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic

During the pandemic, schools had to move rapidly to remote learning and often changed their approach as new technologies were made available. Teachers report marking work on mobile phones as they didn't have their own computer. Students were often having to share a single computer with siblings who also had online lessons to attend.

Schools found that adopting a face-the-video approach in every lesson was tiring and repetitive for both teachers and students. They reported physical difficulties including headaches, dry eyes and tiredness, as well as lower

motivation for students. Therefore, teachers were very keen to develop new ways of working.

Creative responses schools developed include:

- Using blended approaches with a range of activities, some on-screen, some off-screen. This is instead of the teacher and the students being in online meeting 'lessons'.
- Using the same active learning approaches that work in the face-to-face classroom, but with more online tools such as quizzes and discussion boards to support this.
- Being more flexible with tasks and deadlines. This allows learners to take breaks and share resources with other family members.
- Encouraging students to collaborate with each other, through small group discussions or online collaboration tools.
- Allowing some screen time for wellbeing, such as sessions with guidance counsellors or online yoga sessions.

> " Teachers now have a sense of achievement. Before there was a lot of self-doubt: "am I going to be able to adjust?" This time has helped teachers to overcome fears, fatigue and apprehensions. "

Managing screen time should not be about prescriptive timings. Instead, it needs to be part of a holistic approach, using technology to support every learner and teacher. Effective use of technology, focusing on the added value it can bring, has never been more important. It then becomes less about measuring screen time and more about evaluating impact on progress and learning.

> 66 **Breakout rooms for projects works brilliantly. It is wonderful to see [students] presenting and sharing.** 99

Screen time checklist

Use this checklist to help you develop a balanced approach to on-screen teaching and learning.

Timings

Think about the best time in the day to have live screen time with your learners. Look at your learning objectives and decide what would work best. Some options might be:

- A quick discussion at the beginning, with all the students present, to check in with each other and to set up the task. You might want to try a visible 'thinking routine', such as a 'see-think-wonder' to get discussion started, or a poll on a relevant question.
- A check-in during the middle of a session.
- A quick feedback session at the end.

Find out more about thinking routines at Harvard's **Project Zero's Thinking Routines Toolbox.**

Class size

Your teaching screen time does not have to be with the whole class every time:

- Consider holding 1-2-1 sessions or small group discussions, rather than always having whole-class discussions.
- Hold drop-in sessions so that older students can ask questions if they need to.

Screen alternatives

When students work independently it is often screen-based, so suggest alternatives:

- Set a challenge to find something on a walk. This could be noting natural or architectural features.
- Set an observational activity like logging the number of vehicles and pedestrians going past a window, or creating a simple rainfall monitor out of a plastic bottle.

- Let students know when it is OK to handwrite a piece of work and then submit it to you as a photo.
- Ask students to use their printed textbook for research instead of a video or the internet.
- Encourage thinking time away from the screen.

Physical health

Make sure students understand how important it is to have time away from their screens:

- Remind them of the importance of correct posture at a computer, and easy ways to set up their study area more effectively.
- Suggest taking mini breaks, standing up, looking away from the screen as well as taking proper breaks and exercise.
- Share information about the health benefits of turning off screens well before going to bed.

Cameras

Webcams can make it easier to see student reactions, including whether they are engaged in the lesson. However, it is also tiring to have cameras on throughout the school day. Bear in mind:

- Students with a poor internet connection might have to turn off incoming video and will miss out on the visuals.
- A student who is having a difficult day may not wish to have their camera on.
- Students may not want to have their cameras on in their homes. Blurring the background can be effective but this often only works on up-to-date devices.

    – Many video meeting platforms allow you to turn off your camera, but still share your screen.

Prepare in school for time at home

If you are currently in school, think about how learners can be prepared now for future home working, and to help them manage screen time:

- If students are asked to work at home, think about what might help them spend less time at their screens. This could include textbooks and stationery.
- Keep developing students' independent learning and metacognitive skills[2]. Consider setting a research task in class, so you can observe and advise.

❝ Anything is possible – sharing screens, collaboration opportunities. The pandemic has made teachers more tech aware. There has been much more tech-integrated learning. ❞

❝ Learners told us that "teachers that have adjusted for remote learning and for the screen – these are the lessons that we enjoy the most". ❞

Blended teaching

Teaching is likely to be a blend of remote and face to face. Some students may be in another country or quarantining at home, while others are in class. To tackle this, you could set different tasks for students who are not in class, based on the same learning objectives. If you are planning to have students join the class through a video link, make sure they can hear you and fellow students. Think about how they can ask, and be asked, questions.

Beyond academics

Live screen time does not have to be just for academic issues. It can be effective for:

- discussions with the school guidance counsellor.
- online exercise sessions.
- helping learners keep to a familiar routine.
- talking to parents about how students are getting on.

Parents and families

Sharing a rationale for your teaching methods may be helpful if parents are concerned about too much or even too little screen time. You might also want to advise parents on how much help to give students. One of the things that remains important for students is to work independently and to think through a task. Make sure parents know who to contact if they are worried about their child's progress.

1 https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/health-impacts-screen-time-guide-clinicians-parents

2 https://cambridge-community.org.uk/professional-development/gswmeta/index.html

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Further reading

https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/healthy-screen-time-is-one-challenge-of-distance-learning

https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/public-health/screen-time-children-health-research/

https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2020/06/schools-strive-screen-time-balance-complex-equation