

Allisdair Stuart-Bell– Planning for Return to School – 9 July 2020

Background

- I am a parent of two school age children and live with them as well as two other school aged children of my partner. I have been watching them all with some concern as they were moved from the physical classroom to the online version.
- While I have been impressed with the efforts of teachers to make the transition work, and I am sympathetic to the challenges that they are facing, I am worried that my children will not get the education they deserve and need.
- I am also a founder of a local company that designs digital solutions based on research and evidence, so I feel I have a valuable perspective to share regarding my experience with digital transformation.
- I have also designed and delivered education and training in a remote setting for both Algonquin College and my clients, so I understand many of the challenges that you and the teachers are facing.

The Challenge

- Digital transformation is not just about shoving things online. It is actually a change management activity that typically requires adaption at many levels and in many places within the organization including culture, systems, processes, people and technology.
- While teachers have incredible knowledge, skills, personality and dedication that they pour into their work, most were not trained or equipped to go through the enormous effort to deliver all of their program online.
- I have heard from teachers that they are struggling to know how to redesign their programs, keep students learning enough, keep them engaged and then also not overwhelm them.
- I have seen some students consistently spend less than 3 hours on school a week (Gr5), while others spend a maximum of 15-20 hours a week (Gr 8&9). I worry that they are not getting enough from the educational system to be ready for next year or graduation.

The Opportunity

- As a researcher and designer of digital services, I see an important opportunity to help redefine the education that will be offered in the fall.
- I have seen large organizations work to quickly respond to a new development or crisis and am confident that the OCDSB has enough time, if we start soon, to find a way to deliver better online education to OCDSB students in the fall.
- In my view, an ideal approach to supporting students, teachers and the OCDSB in general should revolve around two main phases. The first is a short research phase that would seek to identify:
 - Best practices and ideas into what other countries/jurisdictions are doing.

- Key challenges being faced by students, teachers and key stakeholders.
- Clarification of the OCDSB parameters (i.e. managing class sizes, lack of physical space, limiting the length of online classes to reduce fatigue, being respectful of limited Internet access/usage).
- Based on the research, the second phase would focus on:
 - Defining the art of the possible, what can and should be delivered and what is outside of scope.
 - Defining the platform/products/tools and supports that would be required for teachers and students and parents/guardians.
 - Defining the content delivery approach (i.e. teams work collaboratively to produce a single approach to delivering online content).
 - Piloting and iterating.
 - Customizing the classes/programs based on the teacher's preferences.

The Offer

- I would like you to dream about a way that we could better support our teachers and students by using research and design to offer a better process and environment. One that specifically addresses the challenges I have described above.
- I ask you to imagine a scenario where we bring Gr9 math teachers together to create an excellent, online program. It works off the Ontario curriculum but builds in best practices in online education that are then adapted to our specific realities. Our teachers would be central to building the online modules. But the point is that it would not require everyone to create their own online course, saving the OCDSB time and resources. The effort would be shared across a small group of teachers in partnership with the digital solution designers. And we would also build in the possibility that the course could be customized over time, by any teacher who wants to, to address their unique style, the needs of their students, their environment and so on.
- Ottawa is full of fantastic researchers and service designers, many of whom feel very passionate about this issue.
- I invite you to engage with the research and service design community to help you quickly and effectively design a better approach to digital education here in Ottawa and turn us into a leader in online education.
- There are different ways that you can make this happen. At one extreme you could just ask us to help you define an approach that your staff could implement. At the other extreme, you could hire some of the great research and design thinkers in the community and have them drive and guide the transformation. Or, you could aim for something in between.
- But, regardless of how you involve us, know that we are ready to help.

