■ As a curriculum team, we would plan for everyday, commonplace scenarios in which a teacher might be absent at short notice

PLANNING FOR TEACHER ABSENCES

Alan O'Donohoe shares practical strategies and tips for keeping your class working when you have to be away from the classroom

O ne evening you receive a phone call from a member of your school leadership team, informing you of the dreadful news that a teaching colleague in your subject team has passed away suddenly and without warning. Instantly, a thousand thoughts rush through your mind, from concern for your colleague's family and loved ones, to the practical implications for their teaching groups.

This is the set of circumstances I found myself in just a few years ago, as head of computing, on hearing of the sad and unexpected loss of my friend and colleague. Accompanying the shock, while coming to terms with the impact of his sudden death, was the knowledge that I needed to quickly put plans in place for the next few days. Thankfully, as a curriculum team, we'd planned for everyday, commonplace scenarios in which a teacher might be absent at short notice. This bought us some planning time in the short term, but we needed to plan for the longer term and the uncertainties that might have ensued.

The purpose of this guide

Although extreme events like these are thankfully rare, there is a tremendous amount of value and comfort to be gained from planning for unexpected teacher absences. The experience I described is very much a nightmare scenario and one that nobody wants to imagine themselves in — but it's not an impossibility. The advice and recommendations in this article will help you prepare for a range of circumstances, from the more mundane to the totally unexpected, and help ensure that all your classes can still make learning progress when their computing teacher is absent.

In this instalment of the Insider's Guide, I recommend two long-term strategies that do require an initial investment of time. Rest assured, though, that these will repay you on those occasions when time or circumstances do not allow you to prepare more carefully considered work for your classes.

box clearly labelled 'Emergency Rations' near the teacher's desk.

The time that we invested developing these resource packs paid off many times afterwards. One morning, when a team member was involved in a traffic accident, he was able to ring the school reception and pass on instructions for students and the cover teacher to use the Emergency Rations until he arrived.

" THE TIME WE INVESTED IN PLANNING PAID OFF MANY TIMES AFTERWARDS

Emergency rations

Prepare a one-size-fits-all pack of paper-based resources that can be used at short notice in any standard classroom, with any class. It's far from ideal, but will provide a valuable contingency plan that can be used short-term in any situation.

When emergency building work took our ICT rooms out of service for an indefinite period of time, we were issued with a complicated timetable of replacement classrooms around the school site. Relocating ourselves and our classes intact to unfamiliar classrooms was challenging enough without the added difficulty of also having to plan lesson activities that could be completed in classrooms with no access to computers or the network.

When we originally resourced these packs, we commandeered sets of textbooks and revision materials that were no longer relevant to our present curriculum. We included a printed set of basic instructions for staff and students, for example, "Start with the first article. Make notes using your own words, and illustrate your notes. Answer the questions. Move to the next article." We also included packs of paper and budget pens and stored all these in a

Side projects

In addition to teacher-directed learning activity in your regular lessons, I recommend that students also work on an extended parallel project they have chosen, in which they have a stronger sense of autonomy. These student projects typically last a whole year and incorporate a high degree of flexibility, creativity, and collaboration, with no requirement for formal assessment. The most popular student projects in my experience have been web development, games design, and multimedia projects, but have also included robotics and software development.

To maintain the highest levels of interest and motivation among students, and commitment to their side projects, a portion of curriculum time is made available in which they develop their projects, as well as acquire the necessary knowledge and skills they can use in and out of lessons.

These side projects really come into their own when a teacher is absent and students can work on their side projects rather than other tasks. Since students are heavily invested in their projects, it means fewer classroom management incidents for the supervising teachers. When I've asked the cover supervisor afterwards for

> feedback, they've been very positive, telling me that the class just came in and got on with their projects with a minimum amount of fuss and no need for intervention. This also meant that there were no behaviour management issues that needed attention.

Practical advice

To complement these long-term strategies, here are a number of practical tips and tricks from the computing teaching community:

Imagine you're the cover teacher: Consider what information you would need if you were covering a lesson for a colleague in another subject. For example, keep a handy list of trusted colleagues available, along with their teaching bases, so that a cover teacher can refer to them if there are any issues.

Treasure your cover supervisors: If you develop and maintain positive relationships with these colleagues by ensuring they are adequately prepared, resourced, and valued, it will pay off. Aim to gather feedback from these colleagues afterwards about the quality and challenge of the work.
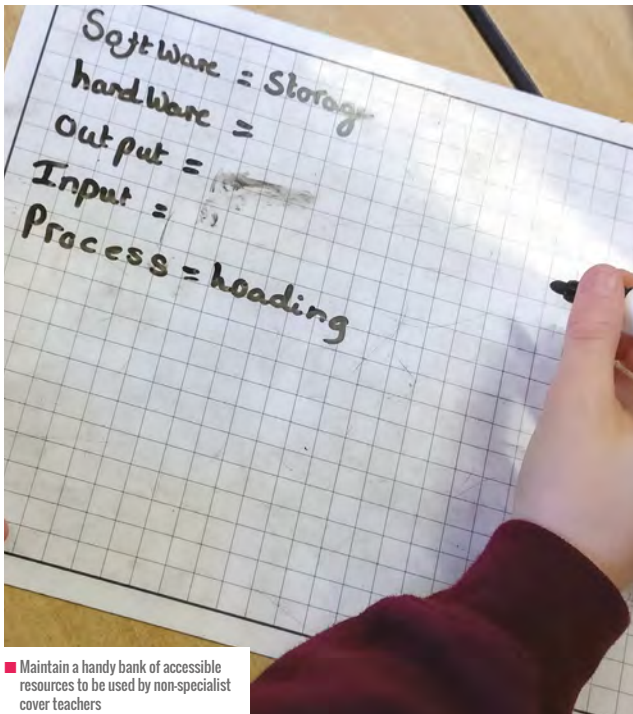
Maintain a handy bank of accessible resources to be used by non-specialist cover teachers

Share up-to-date seating plans: Cover teachers say that accurate seating plans are enormously useful in helping them manage classroom behaviour. One trick I used for occasions with an unfamiliar class was to draw a simple outline map of the classroom, then discreetly ask a student to complete the seating plan for me. Some schools require all teachers to maintain seating plans for all their classes, with copies kept centrally and in the classroom. Specialist software such as Class Charts, ClassDojo, and iDoceo can make life easier for the class teacher to monitor, plan, track, and manage behaviour. If you use one of these, consider how to share it with a stand-in teacher, by exporting or sharing it.

" MOST STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM NOT HAVING THE TEACHER TO FALL BACK ON

Maintain a bank of accessible activities: Computing teacher Khawer Ishtiaq keeps a bank of activities for last-minute absences, all linked to the curriculum for each unit of work: "We try to keep the tasks quite straightforward in anticipation of non-specialist teachers. We also have a bank of 'Computing in the News' activities."

Keep a list of planned topics: Teacher and community leader of Computing at School York, Pete Dring, doesn't like asking colleagues who are too ill to come in to have to prepare cover work, but admits it can be hard to cobble something worthwhile together on their behalf at the last minute. Pete finds the following approach helpful: "Everyone in the department has a shared spreadsheet where we map out (very roughly) what we plan to teach each lesson for a half term, with resources shared centrally. In theory, that means when I get a last-minute email from the cover supervisor, it's a simple job to print off/organise the instructions for the cover teacher."

Share cover work with students: Make use of your learning management system, whether it be MS Teams, Moodle, or Google Classroom, to ensure that the work you planned is accessible to all your students. If you establish this as the norm, your students will come to expect it. You'll be able to include more detail in the instructions, and clickable links to relevant resources. If your seating plan is included as part of this for all to see, there are likely to be fewer arguments later on.

Alert your colleagues: You will have already reported your unplanned absence to school, but if you can find a way to inform your colleagues as well, they may be able to check in on the lessons to see if everything is running to plan. For a planned absence, you can let your colleagues know where to find the work you've set, and any other arrangements in place, in case they are called upon to assist.

Practise password recovery: Computing teacher and author Alan Harrison recommends training all staff in the password reset process for the websites and resources they use, long before they

need to cover your lesson! Alan explains: "It's also worth training the students in self-service password reset for any services they use, e.g. Quizlet, Seneca … Too many cover lessons come back with a note saying "I did what I could, but ten students forgot their passwords.""

Record demonstration videos: Computing teacher Raihaan Chaudary created videos for remote learning during school lockdown, and later discovered that they also worked well for cover lessons. "I created videos using Screencastify [screen recording software] to demonstrate how to complete tasks in detail. These were uploaded to YouTube to allow for easy access for students. I have also used Edpuzzle, enabling me to pause the video at certain times for students and ask a question, which can be a self-marked MCQ [multiple-choice question], or free text to be marked by myself. Edpuzzle also allowed me to monitor which students had watched the videos and how much of the video they had watched."

Hour of Code: Computing teacher Emma Spreadbury has found that free online resources such as the Hour of Code work very well for lower-secondary classes, particularly those one-off lessons in which students are at a tricky bit in a project or need more input before moving on (**hourofcode.com**). For older students, she's pointed them towards a bank of programming challenges she's collected and shared via MS Teams so students can quickly find them. Emma recommends: "Preloading work (both in terms of resources and student awareness) before an absence has always proved incredibly useful. Simply described, students should be in a position where they can self-manage with direction from me. I can inform the cover teacher that the students know what they're doing.

I genuinely think most students benefit from not having the teacher to fall back on or feel like they are expected to produce something significant by the end of the lesson."

Avoid activities that rely on additional resources: It might seem straightforward to ask students to watch online learning videos, but will they need to use headphones? What if the headphones are locked away? The next time you lay eyes on those headphones, will you regret setting that work? It's not ideal, but perhaps easier to manage if the whole class is watching one video at the same time.

Being away from the classroom is never ideal, but having a sturdy backup plan in place can make those unexpected moments in life a little less stressful, and keep students' learning on-track.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Mark Greenwood (1962–2014). Mark was a visionary leader, a champion for education technology, and an outstanding computing teacher who encouraged his colleagues to focus on solutions, not problems. (HW)

ALAN O'DONOHOE
Alan has over 20 years' experience teaching and leading technology, ICT, and computing in schools in England. He runs **exa.foundation**, delivering professional development to engage digital makers, supporting computing teaching, and promoting the appropriate use of technology (**@teknoteacher**).