

Helping the hidden homeless: How technology enabled Kiwi students to make a real difference in their community

"We wanted to give the students a project that has an impact in the real-world as well as their own community. It was important to ensure their safety while working online, and achieve successful learning outcomes. By combining OneNote and Hapara we had the perfect toolkit!" - Cherie Lister, year five and six teacher, Opaheke School.

Situation

Opaheke School in Papakura, New Zealand, takes an inquiry-based approach to learning: year five and six teacher Cherie Lister typically starts class projects by posing questions and scenarios, rather than presenting established facts. It's an approach that supports student agency through effective use of technology, and encourages creative problem solving.

When news broke of several families being displaced from their homes and living in cars in a public park near Opaheke School, Ms Lister's students saw an opportunity to develop an inquiry that had both learning outcomes and made a real difference in the local community.

"Fortunately homelessness isn't something most students have personal experience with, but it is a reality for some people in the face of Auckland's increasingly overcrowded housing market. With this project, students had an opportunity to learn about empathy, hardship and acceptance. More importantly, they discovered that they could make a difference in the lives of others, however small."

Ms Lister, together with Opaheke School's Assistant Principal of e-learning and Innovation Nikkie Laing, were thrilled to see the students developing ways they could help the families living in cars.

"One of the key things about this project was the concept that while it might seem hard to make a difference on your own, banding together as a team you can have an impact. It was then we decided to see if another school wanted to be a part of the project. We contacted Keryn Hooker, a Microsoft Innovative Educator and year six teacher from Methven Primary School in the South Island.

Mrs Hooker said getting around 45 students from two different schools at opposite ends of the country collaborating and keep them on track was no mean feat.

"We knew we needed a way to allow the students to collaborate and get creative. Our students use Office 365 and OneNote for their enquiries, but when we heard Hapara was about to become available on Office 365, we jumped at the opportunity to pilot it for this project. We had an inkling of what it could do and how it would help us oversee student activity, but we were eager to put it to the test."

Solution

After briefing the Opaheke students on the issue of Auckland's hidden homeless population, Ms Lister's class brainstormed ideas for how their school might be able to help. Once they had a selection of ideas, they jumped on a Skype call with the Mrs Hooker's class at Methven Primary School who had also been brainstorming ideas.

The homelessness problem observed by Opaheke students was initially a surprise to the students at Methven Primary. Mrs Hooker says the enquiry not only presented the opportunity for the students to realise that not everyone lives like they do, but also gave them a chance to share ideas for supporting the displaced families.

"The Opaheke students were wowed by how many new fundraising ideas they got from our kids at Methven, including bake stalls, car washes and sausage sizzles. It was a great lesson in collaborating to refine a concept," says Mrs Hooker.

After the brainstorming, the Opaheke students divided into three groups with a different focus. One was in charge of developing ideas around providing food, one was responsible for managing fundraising to buy the food and the third was tasked with identifying and contacting organisations that could help support the displaced families, such as the Auckland City Mission and Salvation Army.

Together with support from the students at Methven Primary School, the Opaheke Students are close to finalising fundraising details and confirming an outreach plan with charity organisations.

The Methven students are planning a bake sale fundraiser, having researched cost effective recipes that will return the highest profit to be donated to the hidden homeless families. The Opaheke students will collect these funds and add them to their own fundraising efforts, before engaging with charity organisations to distribute the funds in the most effective way for the community – this could be as food donations, blankets or a laundry service for the families.

The technology that made it possible

Ms Lister says keeping track of learning across several student groups focusing on a different area of inquiry, spread across two schools hours away from each other was a daunting prospect. Incorporating Hapara as an education management tool sitting on top of Office 365 apps like OneNote gave the teachers the ability to oversee the project with greater visibility than ever before.

"The combination of OneNote and Hapara's Teacher Dashboard meant we had visibility of the project like we've never experienced. One of the most useful features of Hapara for this project was the activity feeds. We could view all recent student activity on Office 365 apps."

The nature of inquiry projects means there isn't a perfect lesson plan or clear actions for the students at every step of the way. Instead, the students had to rely on their own research skills and curiosity to uncover information and determine the next step in the project.

"The activity feeds meant we could quickly identify students who had perhaps hit a wall in their research or were veering off track."

"By working in OneNote, the students are able to collaborate in their groups, share ideas and see what the rest of the class is up to at a glance. We have students on a range of different devices, all working on the same OneNote which makes it easy for the students to work in, and easy for us as educators to monitor. Adding Hapara into the mix gave us that added level of visibility over what the students were working on and how their progress was tracking."

Once the classes implement their plans to help the hidden homeless, the students from both schools will collaborate with each other in the Hapara Workspace. There are many facets to this project, and it could be confusing for students to have all the work from different groups in front of them. The Hapara Workspace means the students can see activity and resources that are relevant to their group, reducing confusion and complexity.

"There's no doubt this project would have been much more difficult without OneNote and Hapara. It saves us time as educators and ensures the students are focused and making progress in their inquiry."

We're excited to explore how Hapara can help us stretch the students and our own teaching capabilities further now that it's available on Office 365."