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Getting the most out of your VLE

The affordability of school fees is something that many parents in the UK are questioning as the impact of the credit crunch forces families to tighten their purse strings. Naturally, this is a major concern for independent schools and investments in non-essential or lower priority items are subsequently being put on hold; technology often being one of them.

However, technology can be an easily identifiable point of difference that independent schools can use to set them apart from the competition. Many schools have already invested in a virtual learning environment (VLE) but they are not extracting the full value their investment. With a little will and investment in time, a VLE can add a new string to the school's bow.

Before launching into how to get more out of your VLE, let's briefly recap on what a VLE is and does. A VLE is a term that refers to technology which supports teaching and learning; it involves collaboration, communication and content tools, as well as providing pupils with an online personal learning space. Anyone with a computer, web browser and network connection can access the VLE both in and out of school. VLEs do not decrease the importance of the classroom or the teacher – they enhance the learning and teaching experience. Commercial packages such as Microsoft Learning's Gateway, Blackboard, Ergo and Studywiz are licensed software so require capital outlay every year. Other packages are open source such as Moodle or LAMS and are entirely free and can be downloaded from the internet.

Many of the schools I work with today have had a VLE in place for a while, but sadly it has been relegated to the role of filing cabinet for a few keen teachers. In such schools, it is a common misperception that the VLE is an additional burden that will absorb more of teachers' valuable time and energy. If you feel that these are typical of the constraining

issues your own school is facing, then here are some guidelines to help schools extract greater value from their VLE, and consequently generate a more positive attitude towards it.

As with most things: get buy-in from the top

It is important to get buy-in from the top – without it most projects will flounder, if not fail. The head should support the use of the VLE and be *seen* to use it, by posting notices, timetables, and generally interacting with pupils and parents through it. It is also a good idea to create a steering committee consisting of senior teachers from interested and useful parties, for example the heads of department and e-learning or multimedia contacts. The steering committee can help develop the strategy to ensure that the VLE adds value to the school and its users, help raise awareness and manage quality control.

Get advice early on

In most cases it is worthwhile bringing in some outside experience to help set up the VLE – usually just a few hours of consultancy time is required. This can prevent you going down dead end paths or creating a VLE that is not intuitive to use. I know of a number of schools that have abandoned their VLEs because they were badly designed from the start and the cost of re-inventing it, in terms of time and energy, let alone finances, far outweighs the cost of buying in advice early on.

Sell the concept

You might think it's not your job to sell the idea to your peers, but if you 'own' the VLE and want it to be a success, then this is essential. Teachers will always say that they don't have the time for it – and this is true – they are busy and under pressure. However, there is a good trade-off for the time it takes to put information up and the time (and cost) it saves in printing and pupil queries. However, don't go for the half-hearted approach... one teacher posted all her assignments on the VLE, but then also photocopied them and handed them out in her classes. No wonder the pupils didn't go to the VLE!

The greatest time savings to be garnered from the VLE, however, will only come after using it for a year when all the content is ready and waiting for the next academic year.

Other benefits, like multimedia and interactive tests, collaborative assignments and tracking students' use, will come once basics have been mastered and users feel more confident about trying new things – more about this later.

Training

It goes without saying that unless people know how to use the VLE, then they won't use it. It pays to invest in some professional training at the start, even if it is just for a few key people who can then go on to train other members of staff – the train the trainer approach. A significant benefit of taking professional training is the course notes that accompany them. These are an invaluable reference tool. When VLE Support trains teachers, we provide course notes that can be readily copied and given to other teachers at the school.

Support

Support is incredibly important; it's a must-have for any school setting up a VLE. Even after training sessions and providing staff with course notes, it is essential that there is someone that teachers can pick up the telephone to and ask a question - it's time issue! Once people become stuck and can't find a solution reasonably quickly, then they are liable to resort to a different solution altogether and, ultimately, enthusiasm dwindles and they turn their back on the VLE.

Most support questions are pretty straight-forward and it just takes someone who is familiar with the system to spend few minutes talking them through. I would advise any school with a VLE to set up a point of contact or mini-helpdesk to support the users.

Showcase it

Once you've got some teachers successfully using the VLE, make the most of them! Encourage a few departments to showcase what they are doing to generate more interest and dialogue about best practice.

Raising and maintaining awareness

There are many different ways of raising and maintaining awareness for a VLE and so you should use whatever works best in your school environment. A successful tactic deployed by one school was to periodically post simple one-page newsletters (which they called MoodleWatch) about the school's VLE. These were physically printed out and put in teachers' mailboxes. Newsletter subjects included: What is Moodle? How do you use Moodle (highlighting a different aspect with each newsletter e.g. forums, assignment submission, etc.)? Case studies about how other schools use their Moodle VLE. This proved to be an effective way of keeping the school's VLE at the front of mind.

Be adventurous

It is not difficult to master the basics of uploading course documents and assignments, submitting marks online and using the basic analysis tools for class or pupil's results, but there is so much more than can be done. If your school has a media team, then it may be worthwhile hooking up with them to explore new avenues.

Here are a couple of ideas to start you off:

1. For more interactive material use eXe (<http://exelearning.org>), a free open-source software package, or Course Genie which is a paid-for, licensed product. These packages will enable you to take a standard Word document and insert images, sound files, interactive tests such as multiple choice questions, and then publish it as a web page. This makes e-learning much more fun for everyone! You can also export the web page as a SCORM package, an internationally recognised specification, which then enables you to carry out analysis of how the page has been used e.g. which pupils have been looking at which pages and for how long.
2. Social Constructivism is an emerging teaching theory that encourages pupils to participate and engage with each other in order to create understanding. A VLE can become a framework to this type of teaching. Barry Spencer, curriculum co-ordinator at VLE Support, worked with Bromley College to apply some Constructivism theory to a 'failing' course, with an average pass rate of 58.2% over three years. Barry posed authentic but loosely defined scenarios for the pupils to work on, awarding 30% of the marks for collaboration on the design and testing of the solution, which he could easily monitor through the VLE forum. Feedback from the pupils demonstrated that it made the learning experience more satisfactory and they acquired more subject confidence as a result. Not only did the year group's retention improve, but the pass rate went up to 70.6%.

Interacting with parents

Don't forget that the VLE is not just for teachers and students, but parents can use it as well. As well as being kept up-to-date with school notices and timetables, parents can see what their child is working on and view their progress.

VLEs have a great deal to offer aside from simply posting up lesson materials. As well as providing a personalised learning area for each pupil, where they can see how well they are progressing, a VLE can help pupils manage their learning in a more flexible and responsible way that suits their needs. For teachers, it can save them time, provide greater insight to

their students' learning and breathe new life into their lessons. This online environment is second nature to most pupils - it is the teachers that have to manage the learning curve. Anything that can be done to ease the way for teachers will improve the success of your school's VLE and it could become a differentiator for the school that builds on the all-important parent, teacher, pupil relationship.