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NAVIGATING THE VLE MAZE

A virtual learning environment is a term that refers to technology which supports teaching and learning; it involves collaboration, communication and content tools, as well as providing students with an online personal learning space. VLEs do not decrease the importance of the classroom or the teacher – they enhance the learning and teaching experience. Some VLEs are commercial software packages which are uploaded onto servers, and others are open source (free) and web based. Anyone with a computer, web browser and network connection can access the VLE both in and out of school. It enables teaching and learning to take place any place at any time – a school with no physical boundaries.

It might sound like a grandiose utopia, but it's very much a reality, and one which the government is keen to foster. The DfES wants all students to have access to an online personal learning space by 2008, so that doesn't give schools, colleges or universities much time to get to grips with and harness this new technology. Where do you start? What VLEs are available and which one is right for you? How much does it cost and what support and training is required?

There are a number of VLEs available, and while some are listed by BECTA, the government's educational technology agency, there are plenty of others which are increasing in popularity that aren't. The most commonly known platforms are Microsoft Learning's Gateway, Blackboard, Ergo, Studywiz, Netmedia and Serco. However there is also increasing interest in 'open source' VLEs like Moodle and LAMS - in January 2007 there were 8,627,964 registered Moodle users alone. All of these systems each have their own benefits and disadvantages, and while budget will naturally dictate to an extent, the VLE you choose should entirely depend on the needs of your teachers and students.

Most of the VLEs, and certainly those listed by BECTA are commercial and charge a significant licence fee to use. Blackboard for example charges around £15,000 a year. If budget is an issue, then open source options like Moodle should be a serious consideration. Open source software is cheaper because it is free to download from the internet and unlike the commercial VLEs like Blackboard it doesn't charge a license fee. It also has the advantage that users can adapt and modify it to suit their learning or teaching needs, making it the most flexible VLE option.

Moodle in particular has a simplicity about it, and if teachers are going to be authors of content then it needs to be simple and not time consuming.

Microsoft Learning's Gateway VLE is popular because, although it is also a commercial VLE with a licence fee, people feel somehow more secure using Microsoft branded products. However, do be aware that you don't necessarily have to have a Microsoft VLE to be compatible with your existing IT, and in fact if you do decide to go with Microsoft's Learning Gateway, do be aware that this will limit your choice of server package and file sharing systems, as you will need to use Microsoft IIS server package and Microsoft Sharepoint. Most other VLEs will be equally compatible with Microsoft and might offer you more flexibility therefore.

Smaller educational establishments may find they struggle to meet the costs associated with a VLE, even if based on open source software. If this is the case, then a collaborative approach between schools could be a solution. Kent LEA for instance has plumbed for a consortium of platforms and created a collaborative hub – schools and colleges can access a VLE from this central hub and share the resource and the cost. A platform can be shared between schools so staff and students can access joint resources such as shared lesson plans or focus groups or group tutorials, and via videoconferencing and podcasts students from different schools can listen and learn from shared lectures for example.

Many local authorities have set up advice services to help schools decide on the best software for them, but the key thing to remember is that technology should support your needs, not dictate them. You would be amazed at how often schools and colleges commit to a certain technology based on what the school in the county next door uses, or what the limited BECTA report recommends, without stopping to consider their own individual needs. Every school, college, university, teacher, classroom and pupil is unique - teachers and students and their needs must be at the heart of a successful VLE strategy, not the other way around.

Once you've identified which VLE suits your needs and pocket, you also need to consider administration and training. – investment here is worth it and means the strategy won't fail at the first hurdle. Schools' technicians and IT departments are already overstretched, so ensure that they will be able to cope with the extra demands that will be placed on their time and budget: teachers and pupils will need training on how to use the software, and as with all IT glitches do happen, so in-lesson support will be necessary to get systems back up and running quickly if they falter so as not to waste valuable lesson time. For many this has been the single biggest hindrance to successful VLE implementation. If you don't have the resources in house, or can't

expand them, then consider an outsourced partner like *VLE Support* – they can advise and help with the installation, content, training, helpdesk and on-site support.

Top Tips for Getting Started with VLEs:

1. Don't automatically opt for the solution the school next door or your LEA recommends – your VLE choice is unique to your needs and circumstances.
2. Investigate the usability and flexibility of different VLEs, as well as costs
3. Manage staff expectations – all of the benefits of VLEs won't be realised overnight – one step at a time.
4. Consult with your teachers and pupils – they are the ones who will be using it and it is vital that the system you deliver is appropriate to their needs
5. Involve parents in the consultation process too – moving to a VLE is a culture change for all involved and it's important to get 'buy-in' from everyone right from the outset
6. Do not underestimate the staff training and resources that will be needed to make your VLE strategy a success. Consider the flexibility of a specialist outsourced provider for VLE training and support.

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