



VIRTUAL LEARNING



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The Virtual Learning Environment

Empowering our students to become autonomous information literate learners through use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Context

In 2006, the Year 7 and 12 cohorts were the first St Angela's students who were able to take advantage of the lap-top scheme and lease a lap-top to use in school to extend and enhance their learning, as well as to allow them to access the curriculum out of school. This was also the year when we started to actively look for ways to engage e-learning in our

classrooms and embed effective approaches to ICT, and it is on this that this case study focuses.

What is the VLE?

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) can be used in reference to the school VLE, our learning platform as well as the World Wide Web, which is the ultimate VLE.

What we did

Year 1:

'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step'

Lao Tzu

Even though we weren't exactly sure where the journey might take us, from the very beginning we have consistently kept the VLE at the top of our whole school agenda. From day 1 we have ensured that every staff member was trained in how to access and use the VLE and we continue to hone our VLE expertise by regularly sharing good departmental practice at in-house CPD sessions.

In the first year of implementation we set about making our departments transparent and accessible to students through the medium of the internet – this meant time was dedicated to uploading our resources. We created various subject courses on our school VLE – which were clearly titled and sectioned, so students could easily locate and use various materials be it: powerpoints; worksheets; film/music clips; interactive games or revision information.

In essence, during that first year we set up on-line textbooks, taking us closer, as we then thought, towards our vision of becoming a paperless school.

What we found in that first year

- we could avoid all the 'Oh, I wasn't in that lesson...' excuses – everything was on the VLE, the responsibility rested with the students, as they could easily select and download missing resources and make up any missed work.
- it was from the start a two way process – students responded positively to newly uploaded work, asking for more material and sometimes even looking ahead in the topic, and so their enthusiasm encouraged the teachers to continue regularly engaging with the VLE.
- Our 21st century students liked this 21st technological in-school and out of hours method of personalised learning.
- Some departments found it had a positive impact on their GCSE results – the year 11 student VLE logs showed an increase in independent learning as they accessed revision material and supplementary resources.



Year 2: Organising our procedures

With the resources uploaded, we focused on how we could most efficiently use the material and the internet in our teaching and learning. We wanted to move away from simply storing material on the VLE – so it was little more than a virtually accessible resource library – to making it interactive and academically engaging for students and staff.

To improve and enhance the interactive appeal of our resources and develop independent information literate learners we used different software to create interactive games to assess student understanding. We developed subject specific webquests – giving students a key question to be resolved by guided use of the VLE and internet as well as linking relevant hyperlinks into all KS3 schemes of work, so that every lesson had a useable website which promoted independent learning.

Departments sought ways to explicitly use the VLE to enhance their own practices and ensure transparency amongst all members – the RE department created a RE Departmental Administration course, which allows us to upload all bulletins, memos, assessments and mark schemes and share across the department all relevant information.

Staff were encouraged to monitor student use of lap-tops in their lessons. Students were invited to evaluate the use of lap-tops and the VLE in their lessons, allowing staff an insight into how they found the integration and delivery of e-learning during that term.

As we became more adventurous with our application of e-learning and the use of the VLE, it was paramount to our success that we continued to keep the VLE at the top of our agenda not solely at a whole school level because also in departments and every single class room, as such we regularly gave time to sharing good VLE practice in departmental meetings.

As evidence of how seriously we as a school feel about the VLE and its integral importance to the success of all our independent learners, two departmental VLE co-ordinators were also appointed and given responsibility for implementing, co-ordinating and managing the use of VLE within their departments.

The transparency that was developed within departments by uploading our administration was piloted with the new Year 7 cohort – as we created departmental VLE lessons to deliver in their induction week. These presentations were interactive and allowed students to access and manipulate the VLE according to the instructions on the presentation. The VLE lessons were subject specific and shared with them the big picture of how the VLE is used in each subject, why it was integral to their learning and what they could accomplish using the VLE.

To reinforce the introductory lesson of how the VLE was used, the school planner had a VLE log in page. Some departments created an insert slip to be stuck into the front of their exercise book about how students should save their lap-top work after the lesson.

What we found in the second year

- we were able to engage in more dialogue and communication with students outside of the classroom by using the facilities of the school VLE
- there was greater visibility throughout the school and prominence given by departments to sharing their big VLE picture with the students – various displays were put up at both a whole school and departmental level, emphasising the importance of student interaction with the VLE.





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Year 3: Challenging and Empowering Independent RE Learners

Having the resources and procedures in place, we focused solely on the students and how to extend them further into independent learners. One of the strategies used to give them a greater sense of ownership was to encourage them to use the VLE and internet to create their own teaching resources to be used in the classroom. Their resources had to be informative, their own work and presented to their peers by a specific deadline. This initiative brought to light how 'Everyone in St Angela's is an e-learner' as even the teachers found some new interesting software from these student-led learning sessions.

What we are nurturing in our students is the sense that they can autonomously engage with their learning – they should no longer see information as knowledge that solely resides within their teachers' minds. The information is there for them to independently and virtually access – we are their facilitators as we help empower the St Angela's girls to be 21st century effective technological global citizens.

Teachers were encouraged to make their use of relevant hyperlinks more explicit and include the hyperlinks on topic worksheets, so students could access the websites at their own leisure. In an additional attempt to take out-of-hours learning further, polls and discussion forums were created to allow students to express their understanding and further explore the issues generated through the topic.

What we found in the third year

- in order to accommodate the students' timetable, some departments have opted to negotiate lap-top days with their students – allotted days on which the students will bring their lap-tops to lessons to pursue VLE focused learning
- We had to reassess how we wanted our exercise books to be used by lap-top students. Our dilemma was how to support students in producing meaningful exercise books which teachers could take in and mark whilst working on their lap-tops throughout the lesson. Each department because of the differences in departmental teaching styles and expectations has had to create their own solutions – such as having students email work to teachers after lesson; saving the work to the VLE for teachers to assess on-line or even simply printing off the work and sticking it into their books.

Has the impact been worth the effort?

The implementation of the VLE has positively changed the teaching and learning at St Angela's. Our girls are keen for class lap-top work, eager to complete on-line homeworks and projects and they are consistently developing their ICT capability through differentiated cross-curricular activities. As teachers, we have had to make a huge investment and commitment to the VLE – uploading resources and creating appropriate material – but we have reaped what we have sown and the students' enthusiasm and participation to the e-learning we have provided is proof enough of the impact of the VLE.

When we look ahead – where we would like to be

- We will continue to be compassionately ruthless as we plough on and are motivated by the students' enthusiasm and feedback about how and what they'd like to learn through use of our on-line discussion forums and evaluations.
- We will continue to mirror and academically transform the e-technologies we see in the working world around us such as podcasts, blogs, twitters etc all to ensure we stimulate our students and impart to them transferable skills to make them effective and successful 21st lifelearners.
- We will continue to rise to the challenge of increasing the interactive nature of our resources and seeking out better ways to e-teach – sharing good practice as a regular part of our CPD sessions to ensure individual successes are disseminated at a whole school level.
- Our ultimate vision is to totally commit to the paperless vision with every child having a lap-top or every department a lap-top bank. This move will enable us to mark on-line so e-teaching and learning can happen in and out of school.