Tailor-made learning through a virtual environment

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Nick Jones, Vice Principal
John Cabot City Technology College

Personalised learning has taken on a new aspect at John Cabot City Technology College since the introduction of a new learning platform. The school is already renowned for its unique approach to education but the implementation of Serco's eLearning School system is opening up new opportunities.

Chris Hall, eLearning Co-ordinator, said: "The personalised learning agenda is becoming more and more important in education at the moment. A lot of schools just put things on line but it's more important to engage with the students. What we are creating is an opportunity to enable learning to take place in different ways, including distance and remote learning."

Education innovations

One year 11 student has a chronic illness that prevents her from attending school but staff at the Bristol comprehensive have been able to create a tailor-made package for her to study at home when she feels able to work.

ICT students are set tasks that involve using different programs. They are provided with the resources and the files they need then submit their work on-line. They also receive feedback through the system.

In PE course materials are available online and can be accessed through laptops so students can work in small groups, at their own rate. "It means that the teacher can facilitate the lesson rather than being tied to one place delivering the information and the students get more involved," Chris said.

In PSE students created a series of presentations on different topics to share with their classmates through an online conference room so it was possible to use a transcript of the discussions as part of the lesson assessment. "The way the students exchange with each other in a conference room is at a much higher level than in oral exchanges. They use text speak but they communicate much more freely," Chris said.

Driving change

The system is becoming more popular throughout the school and similar examples of how it is used can be found in science and modern language departments. Although use began mainly as revision modules the virtual environment is extending across the curriculum because of its power.

In science lessons, for example, a series of modules have been set up as Assessment for Learning so students can monitor their own understanding of a topic. Teachers can see immediately which objectives need further work.

"When you see it used in a lesson it's stunning. There are examples of lessons being restructured to deal with how the children are doing. The students' input is actually shaping lessons," said Vice Principal Nick Jones.

He has also been impressed with the power that effective communication has brought to lessons. "This system is catching the middle ground children who might normally be missed. Not the answer-grabbers or the bright ones but those who don't want to show themselves to a teacher as not knowing something."

Integration

The key to success with a learning platform is to ensure it is not one-directional, according to Nick. Virtual learning can be focussed on the teacher, the student, administration or content, but John Cabot has worked hard to make it effective for all four.

One of the deciding factors in the choice was that eLearning School integrates with the school's existing Facility management system. Nick said: "It's almost top of my list to have integration with our MIS because that is the way forward. Having lots of different packages just leads to problems but integration of all your information is the way things are going to happen. A virtual classroom has to reflect the real one."

Learning success

As a result of its pioneering curriculum work John Cabot's students are leading the way in academic success. Year 7 already undergoes a unique timetable that has done away with traditional subjects and replaced them with a "Learning to Learn" system.

In addition from next year, KS4 students will have only two compulsory subjects – English and maths – and a huge range of choices for other topics. Many students are opting for GCSE in year 9 in order to move on to higher qualifications at later stages. Some are leapfrogging GCSE altogether and going directly to AS, including a year 10 AS Critical Thinking group. Uniquely the school is planning to put a lower group through its science GCSE early to give them more time for key subjects at the usual exam time.

"This is a staged moved from the horizontal to a vertical curriculum and we have got to have an effective learning platform to support it. It will not happen without a well populated VLE," Nick said.

The school hopes soon to have 5-10 per cent of its curriculum time self-supported, which will give teachers extra development time to extend the available materials.

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