



Raising student aspirations

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John Watkinson, Assistant headteacher
Headlands School and Community Science College

Headlands School and Community Science College considers itself to be an average school in many ways, but it is determined to give its students an exceptional education. It has taken a progressive step in establishing a virtual learning platform.

Assistant headteacher John Watkinson explained: “By most measures used on schools, our social mix and resources for example, we are average. But we are a happy school. Parents are proud of it for being a caring sort of place. We are hoping to use the learning platform to help lift pupils’ aspirations above average.”

Headlands, in Bridlington, East Yorkshire, already used the Facility management information system so decided to install the integrated virtual learning platform eLearning School to make most effective use of both. Staff are steadily finding new ways to use the combination.

John said: "Vicky Garland from the admin staff had no previous programming knowledge but now basically runs the site. The learning platform is very easy to run. It works and it's simple. Three departments are making big use of it, putting their course work onto it. It is mainly science, business studies and history so far, but others are looking at it."

On-line access

The school gives each department an area before log-in that can be seen by anyone who accesses the web. Other general information such as available courses, details of events and the school prospectus are also included – aimed mainly at parents or anyone seeking general information about the school, such as prospective employees, John explained.

After log-in students and staff can reach teaching materials and shared information such as syllabus details. Student timetables are extracted from Facility and assessment and course modules can be linked straight to them so that each individual has direct access to what they need. "The most powerful thing for me is that I can put the right information straight on to the right lesson just by clicking through to the timetable."

Students are allocated a personal area where they can lodge useful files that they can also reach through the internet at home. "The kids get very excited about that because they can upload and download whatever they want. They used to have to send things home by email but now they can reach their own area and work on anything they have put there. Some of them say it's the most useful thing," John said.

Discussions

The learning platform has also proved extremely useful in staff discussions. By opening a discussion group the school is able to ensure everyone has the opportunity to put across their views on major issues such as detention policy. "When we put it to the staff through the VLE about a fifth responded but in a traditional meeting only a few would get chance to speak. People also put forward more reasoned arguments because they had chance to consider them before they wrote. In traditional meetings people think on their feet and give less structured arguments."

Now the English department has an innovative idea to make everyone take part in some lessons. Staff are planning a 'silent discussion' where all exchanges on a topic must be carried out through the computer and all vocal communication is banned. "They are hoping that everyone will contribute and that those contributions will be more thoughtful. It will give a new dimension to lessons," John said.

Online successes

John has also successfully used the platform to set assignments for his pupils over a number of weeks with opportunities to return work to him for comment during the project. "Although I couldn't give interim marks, because that would have ended the session, I made comments on what each pupil had completed so far. I think some people got higher marks than they would have done before because they could ask questions and I could guide them. It gives a much easier transference of guidance and I found it very easy to administer due to the class list link to Facility."

Another success has come from the questionnaires section of the VLE. "It was absolutely brilliant. I have always surveyed my pupils for feedback on my teaching but when I put it online it worked really well. I was very impressed," John said.

The future

Although only three departments are using the system fully there is an increasing interest in the learning platform and both John and headteacher Steve Rogers are confident that its use will grow in the future. Collaborative areas could be used to guide performance management, for example, but it is in lesson development that John sees most potential. "I have tried some aspects with my pupils but other people will find other uses for it. It is a way of working for the future." John said.



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