

Are you making the most of your VLE? Dave Foord has some ideas to get your students learning in the way that suits them best...

Many educational organisations in the UK from Primary through to HE will already have a Virtual Learning Environment (possibly referred to as a VLE, VLP, MLE, PLE or some other acronym that essentially means the same thing) that they will use to a greater or lesser extent. How many, though, are making full use of such platforms? Technology is changing learner behaviour – for example the prevalence of smart phones and tablets amongst the population means that many secondary

school students will have (or have access to) devices that can connect to the organisation's VLE to access content in a much wider range of locations, and this is a significant game changer. Of course, a VLE isn't essential for this kind of access, but what it does do is provide a relatively safe virtual environment, which for schools is an essential consideration. Here are a few ideas for ways in which these modern, mobile learners could be benefiting from a dedicated virtual learning environment, imaginatively incorporated into the curriculum...



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Film club

The internet contains millions of hours of video footage, ranging from the very bad to the truly excellent. If a teacher locates a clip that is especially useful and pertinent, he or she can easily add a link to it, or embed it to the VLE, giving students an additional source of information that could help them with their homework. They could either access this through a normal computer (in or out of school) or from a mobile device – which could be whilst waiting for a train, on the bus home, or during a lunch break at a part-time job. The ability to pause, rewind and replay gives learners (especially ones who may need more time to comprehend and analyse information) a level of personalisation, as well as giving them the chance to use a medium that they are more likely to engage with than written instructions alone.

#2

Sound advice

Audio is grossly underused in education, which is a shame, as it can be very easy to produce, and immensely effective. For example a tutor could create a simple audio recording summarising the key points of the topic he or she has just covered. When added to the VLE, it can be downloaded by students onto an MP3 player or similar device, and listened to while jogging, delivering newspaper, travelling etc. This can be a very effective revision technique – which in light of recent changes to the GCSE system is going to be very important. Another obvious area where audio is particularly relevant is MFL, for which hearing the spoken word is so important.

#3

Question time

Another feature of VLEs that is often underused is the ability to create fun and interactive methods of formative assessment (e.g. quizzes). Although it requires an investment of time to devise these, including good feedback, it can seriously reduce the teacher's marking burden. Moreover, some learners are happier receiving the 'anonymous' response that the computer gives them, rather than personal criticism, however constructive, from a tutor. The fact that they can attempt a quiz, get instant feedback, then try it again, and again if necessary (which isn't possible when relying on a teacher to do the marking) has been shown to improve the motivation of many learners – and making such exercises available via mobile devices, safely, maximises the chance of students using them successfully.

These are just three ways in which teachers can improve their engagement with the VLE – additional benefits include giving students who are absent due to illness mechanisms to keep up with the work, and the potential for 'lessons' to continue in the event of building closure due to snow, flooding,

swine flu or Icelandic volcanoes. There are significant accessibility advantages, too, as learners can make use of the content on their own devices with their own settings or assistive technologies, giving the disabled learner full control over his or her learning support.