



## **Empowering students to take control of their online learning environment**

### **Background**

Ninestiles is a high performing secondary school, based in Birmingham. We have Technology and Applied Learning College status and in January 2009 received our 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive outstanding Ofsted report.

We are committed to providing a quality education that recognises the importance to the individual student of both examination results and personal development.

We place great emphasis on individual achievement and on developing the self confidence, skills and values that will enable our students to make a positive contribution to our 21st century democratic and multicultural society.

Previously we have had federations with schools in Birmingham and Gloucester and at present Ninestiles is the lead school in a federation of schools in Hastings. As a result of the work of the federation, these schools have made unprecedented and rapid improvements, some of which have secured the most improved results in their area.

### **Challenge**

Empowering students to become more responsible for their own learning can boost their confidence and raise the morale of the whole school community with the sharing of new skills and resources. We are starting to see signs that indicate within five years students will expect as much control over their online learning environment as teachers. However, questions may be asked about whether students are being given too much control too soon. Whilst schools should be implementing initial plans now, a step-by-step approach is imperative to ensuring a successful cultural shift in the long-term. It is a journey that Ninestiles School has already embarked on with our learning platform.

### **Solution**

#### **First step: access rights for responsible students**



Before schools can give students complete control over their learning platforms, they must address security issues concerning network abuse and data protection. It is important that schools continue to retain control over certain confidential data such as contact details and exam results. At Ninestiles, ten members of staff have full access rights to the learning platform, whereas all staff and teaching assistants can amend most pages. Access rights have also been granted to a small selection of trustworthy students, these students are now updating various parts of the learning platform, including their own college areas and the student voice site. This is the first step towards making it the norm for all to be able to contribute to the organic growth of our Platform.

The school is currently holding interviews with students interested in becoming forum mediators or web designers with the aim of executing a successful roll-out of open access to forums.

### **Encouraging responsible behaviour**

One way of encouraging positive behaviour is to reward responsible students with more freedom; the more they demonstrate responsible use of technology, the more games and web tools they can use. Some have been given access to write their own web pages and share their work with peers. Others have asked to substitute a written assignment with a movie, which encourages them to use their initiative.

### **Giving students' ownership**

Ninestiles' students, as with many other schools, are keen to develop systems that will benefit the entire school community. As students grow in confidence and their ownership over their learning increases, their use of the learning platform rapidly snowballs. The engagement of pupils in any process depends upon whether they are interested in participating in the first place. A student will use Facebook at home because they can develop a profile about themselves online and invite friends to become part of their online community. They find this process fun and therefore it engages them. With the right technology, transposing this into an educational environment is achievable.

The Social Networking Bricks in Frog have enabled us to provide the students with this environment and in the process has achieved so much more, it instantly made Frog "cool" because it incorporates technologies they enjoy using. Students can only



change their status every 30 minutes, but it does mean they log on, which is the main struggle when implementing any Learning Platform, we even had 150 students logging on Christmas Day, which with our previous VLE's was unheard of.

While the students are logged on this gives us a fantastic opportunity to engage, promote and collect vital information. Frog gives us the power to update student dashboard with new events, announcements, surveys and discussions, for example by putting a very quick survey on a student's dashboard we were able to gather 630 unique responses with 24 hours, raising to 1100 after 3 days. The ability to target certain groups around school is also being used in the same way from the collection of careers data in Year 10 to the Student Prom committee gathering votes from year 11s for the Prom King and Queen.

Placing adverts immediately above where the students update their status has proved to be an extremely powerful tool. Where as previously this kind of information was posted on a notice-board in a corridor it is now unavoidable! Highlighting events ranging from advertising tickets for a school production to announcing the latest points in the inter college competition has created a much greater sense of involvement for the students at Ninestiles.

### **Best practice for giving pupils control**

Students already have high expectations of how much control they should have over their learning and they do not expect to be filtered or supervised. In the future it is likely to be normal for students to be just as much a part of devising school intranets as their teachers are. I would advise schools to identify students who are already prepared to take on this responsibility and give them small tasks, developing their skills as they move up in the school. It is better to give responsible students an increasing amount of control, allowing them to set a good example for others. It is also vital to ensure that every student feels valued and rewarded. One way Ninestiles uses is this is by allowing students to voice their opinions via an online suggestion box which goes directly to members of the student voice who then will raise any issues or suggestions at their weekly meeting.

The students profile page has become a personalised portfolio where they can share information about themselves and show exemplar work to teachers, other students and parents. It is also becoming a place where we can attach and amend data for



that student, for example student mentoring is now done through their frog profile, so the student can see a record of their mentoring data and staff can amend.

### **The Future**

The Future for Ninestiles is to move away from the traditional Learning Platform and carry on to embed Frog in as many school process's as possible, our primary focus of course will be Teaching and Learning but with the ability to combine data from various systems around the school teamed with the fact that students and staff already have an online profile means we can expand this to become a way of tracking progress, recording achievement, enhancing personalised learning and attaching every piece of data we have on students and staff to there frog profile.