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St. Wilfrid's RC College

As a specialist school in mathematics and computing we chose Frog as our virtual learning environment, and have developed and customised the platform over the last three and a half years, providing access to students, staff, our primary feeder schools and, recently, to parents via the Parent Portal.

Background

St. Wilfrid's is a Roman Catholic Specialist College in Mathematics and Computing, offering a broad and balanced curriculum, where every pupil is an equally valued member of our community. Situated 12 miles from Newcastle-upon-Tyne in South Shields, we currently educate 928 11-16 year old boys and girls. The culture of our school is based distinctly on Christian values, which are reflected in our mission statement.

We encourage all of our pupils to demonstrate high levels of commitment and co-operation, while all members of staff endeavour to provide maximum opportunities for learning and progression within a secure and safe environment.

Our education philosophy is based strongly on partnership where home, school, primary schools, parish and the wider community work closely together to provide maximum support to the educational process.

Three and a half years ago this philosophy steered our school through the decision process in finding a preferred virtual learning platform culminating with the acquisition of a FrogServer, FrogSecureGateway and recently the Parent Portal.

The Challenge

The drive to incorporate a capable VLE into our school community was led by the senior leadership team, with the decision process extending over numerous months. The challenge was to select a VLE provider that could meet all of the selection criteria without limiting the development of our school community, instead, offering the flexibility and individuality to evolve as requirements dictated.

The potential to engage both staff and pupils was a key goal for our VLE. Ease of use and provision of flexible access to school resources and revision materials were essential features for our platform choice. "Having had previous experience of ICT training for the staff, ease of use was paramount if the platform was going to become a feature of everyday life at St Wilfrid's."(Peter Mitchell, Deputy Head)

In order to engage the students, the VLE needed to provide interactivity that would allow them to individualise parts of the VLE, make it their own and assist them in their personal learning journey.

With teaching and learning the priority for our staff, the choice of VLE needed to facilitate the research, planning, preparation and viewing of learning resources. As well as providing this flexibility with organisational tools, 24 hour remote access and addressing work load pressures, the system of choice needed to improve school communications, link to MIS and move towards a paperless society. "One key argument for investing in our own platform was to facilitate financial savings. The ability to replace much of the paper based systems in school and the associated costs made the office manager an interested participant from the onset of the process." (Peter Mitchell, Deputy Head)

During the journey through the selection process, it became evident that not all VLE systems were the same and did not offer equal flexibility, personalisation, and range of abilities in support, product development, on-site storage and value for money. An attractive look and ease of use were essential in the implementation process as users connected with a unique school brand rather than a one size fits all. The premise that St. Wilfrid's would create a personalised VLE became a major factor in the decision making process and further promoted the school as a specialist maths and computing college.

The Solution

The procurement process began in 2006 after a detailed review of the systems available. The solution that addressed the challenges faced by our school was Frog. The confidence gained from observing how other schools had begun to implement the platform, strengthened our decision, with the assurance that we could develop our own platform and incorporate our school's culture and ethos.

In April 2006, St. Wilfrid's went live with Frog and the number of unique pages viewed per day has since increased tenfold; we have made progress in testing, adapting and implementing features and are now continually developing version 3.

Even in the initial stages with the development of version 1, staff were surprised with the capabilities and possibilities that the platform offered. However, as with any new software, it was inevitable that stakeholders would take to the platform with varying degrees of success and enthusiasm. "A phased roll out had been planned initially, with training aimed at different school user groups. The reality was quite different however. The simplicity of use meant that most school information systems were able to move onto Frog from a very early stage. Paper-based systems were maintained in parallel for a short period, with a 'switch over' date put into the school calendar. In a few short months, all internal communications and systems were hosted on the platform. Significantly, everyone came on the journey with only minimal training required; such is the simplicity of use" (Peter Mitchell, Deputy Head).

The Benefits

Like other schools, St. Wilfrid's RC College has embraced new technologies in the pursuit of improving teaching and learning. Although not in isolation, Frog is integral in the school's vision for providing personalised learning without walls, and increasing access to resources for the students and the school's wider community.

Prior to the procurement of Frog, our school had invested in a website and associated hosting costs which have since been defrayed by having the frogserver on site. We now host our own school website which can be easily and rapidly developed using the Frog system tools and, with controlled functionality, removing the reliance on a third party company to design and maintain the site. With user specific access and levelled security, the V.L.E. can easily be updated with content added, modified or deleted from any location on or offsite.

The outlay and procurement of Frog have been balanced by the accrued savings of moving towards a greener environment. All school information; bulletins, cover lists, diaries, emails, resource booking and policy documents, is available in the respective teacher and student dashboards.

The Introduction of SecureGateway

The increased benefit of digitising the administrative tasks was observed when Frog introduced the SecureGateway product. Deputy Head, Peter Mitchell explained: "As with all the other schools that were working with Frog, we were instantly impressed with the benefit of being able to access computers within school remotely from any location". Within a matter of weeks, the reporting system developed to the point that 90% of teaching staff were compiling reports offsite using SIMS, allowing a secure, seamless transition between work completed on and offsite. In addition to the relative ease at which administration tasks are tackled, the secure system allows that capture of a PC in school so that the user can have access to the full portfolio of software licensed to the school computer. The advantage is the accessibility of the school software to students and teachers opening up the curriculum and aiding teaching and learning outside of lesson times. After working with the gateway, staff began to ask if they would be able to access the gateway during the normal course of the day when they were out on CPD training, conferences and when delivering outreach work with primary feeder schools. This posed the question of how best to meet the needs with minimum disruption to ICT classes. The solution was to commission a bank of PCs dedicated to meeting the requirements, and during the summer of 2009 twelve computers that were to be retired, were recycled and given a new lease of life, providing staff 24/7 access. This access has since been rolled out to our Y6 primary feeder school teachers. It's planned, with training and support, collaborative planning and resources and will be available to enrich the transition process.

Improving Communication and Efficiency

In school, the students have benefited from a digital environment that promotes teaching and learning with dedicated email, forums and subject areas. The initial roll-out saw the VLE promoted as an enhanced interactive tool where staff and pupils could communicate by allocating, submitting and evaluating work through the use of email, the students portfolio and the lesson planner. Three and a half years on, it is now second nature for students to manage their work online. USB pen drives are no longer in use, as work is managed via student file allocation on the frogserver.

The introductions of the secure email used by staff and pupils, and recently the forums, have benefited the school by enhancing the ethos, openness and approachability of staff. We also have selected Frog Champions (pupil moderators) who are given extra access rights and can withdraw any threads they deem unreasonable.

Departmental Areas

The development of the subject areas has seen varied schemes, from the most basic pages to departmental areas that have only been limited by their imagination and time.



Figure 1: Shows a snapshot of the ICT subject area incorporating flash menus and motion graphics.

Through the initial development phase, it was apparent that some departments were going to make slower progress than others. Therefore, in support of the training on offer, it was decided that a dedicated ICT champion would build and mentor the departments that were keen to engage but required more assistance with the project.

Lesson Planning and Assessment

The lesson planner within Frog has been used by the main departments for some time now. It is beneficial in allocating work to pupils. Absent pupils can access work and submit it to the teacher. The mark book is a powerful tool allowing submitted work to be evaluated at a glance, using the self-evaluation traffic lights (AFL) providing immediate feedback from the pupils on how well they have understood the topic.

Continuing with AFL, leading departments have utilised the form database to facilitate pupil assessment with quizzes, mini tests, end of module tests and self/peer assessment. The benefit of using Frog to create the evaluation forms allows rapid feedback to pupils on topic and overall levels. Once these assessment pages have been created, they are easily modified for a changing curriculum. The data can then be viewed at any time to assess pupil progress.

Transition Zone

The VLE has directly benefited the transition of pupils to and from the school. The availability of a platform that allows secure access to various user groups has allowed the promotion of portals. At present, St. Wilfrid's has developed a Y6 Portal and is in the consultation phase with ex-pupils who wish to maintain their connections with our school to develop a Post 16 transition zone.

To assist in transition, primary feeders are invited to complete afternoon sessions which develop their ICT skills and provide training in the use of the Frog Learning Platform. They build their own 'My Portfolio' page and populate it with their best work. The purpose is to create a foundation for individualised learning prior to their move to St. Wilfrid's and to improve the transition process. Each pupil builds their own page and uploads documents and images in order to customise their space. This unique page requires each pupil to bring with them digital copies of work and images. The Y6 transition activities are centred on the access to our dedicated 'Year 6 Portal'. Each student is given a secure login which allows access to the dedicated area where pupils can email, chat on secure forums, store data, view Y7 myth-busters work and build their own web area. Over the last two years, activities have taken place in the last half of the summer term. Now, with the positive benefits of the portal apparent, some primary feeders are asking that the familiarisation takes place at the start of Y6 so the pupils can have access to the tools earlier and are looking to enhance their curriculum throughout their final year in KS2. In addition, one feeder school is in the partnership process of developing their whole school VLE with us, as we have the in-house capability and the roving support through our Specialist Primary ICT Technician.

Looking Forward

Frog's flexibility has been crucial in allowing our school to "go it alone" and experiment with projects and ideas that deliver supportive solutions to our students, teachers, parents and the wider community. As a school, we have yet to exploit the

full potential of the system and we will continue to promote the benefits to stakeholders.

We see Frog as the portal to the outside world, and are anticipating the day when our pupils can communicate with others anywhere in the world (real time). We envisage that, through links with other schools, we could create user accounts, producing effective cross curricular activities. Both sides would learn from each other, sharing ideas resources and prepare our students for the globalised challenge.

At St Wilfrid's, we have an emergency plan for school closure. All PCs are set to allow pupils and staff access through the secure gateway, enabling pupils to continue to work at home. In turn, staff would be able to answer any questions via email, thus limiting disruption to normal teaching.

In the immediate future, we will be implementing and developing the Frog Parental Engagement Portal, linked to our MIS system. Parents will be able to access information about their child's progress and community initiatives.

Further developments that are planned include the following;

- Continued development of our Primary Portal and Feeder VLE's.
- Post-16 Portal in support of transition activities for our Year 11 pupils.
- Student Voice – year group areas and school council ownership.
- Use departmental areas for students to create their own resources in Channel 4 clip style and use of the 'my set work'.
- Year 9 options process
- Global Challenge – the school is looking further afield to partner with foreign schools already linked to our partner Siemens. International partnership will begin to address the important challenge and providing the global dimension to students' education.