

## February Online: a blended learning project.

### Background.

Tideway school is an 11 to 16 comprehensive that serves the coastal community of Newhaven in East Sussex. In 2004 about 80% of the school infrastructure was destroyed as the result of an arson attack. In the four years since then a new school has risen on the site of the old one. The new school is due to open in February 2009. During their move into new premises students will be given an extended two week break during the traditional end of term holiday. The school has used this opportunity to provide an extensive online curriculum package to students through the school learning platform.



The February Online Homepage

### The Project.

Tideway has been implementing its current learning platform since July 2008. This platform is called UniServity. Prior to this the school had been using a VLE since 2002.

The aim of the February Online project was to make as much of the curriculum as possible available online to students during their extra one week break. Students could also collect a paper based workbook from school and some lessons, such as PE, were arranged off-site in community sports facilities.

The online project was based on the **assumptions** that:

- most students would choose to work online

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- *most students would choose to work flexibly, at a time and a place that best suited them*
- *the quantity of work produced would be greater than that in face to face lessons*
- *the completion rate for work would be higher than classroom based lessons*
- *the quality of work would be higher*

The project aimed to explore the following areas:

- **digital exclusion.** How could the school make provision for those who had no computer hardware or Internet access at home
- **the design of online learning opportunities.** What did online learning look like and who had the necessary skills in school to design appropriate learning opportunities
- **students skills.** Six months after the introduction of the learning platform what skills had students developed in its use and what skills gaps still existed
- **teacher skills.** What skills had teachers developed in their use of the learning platform and what skills were still required
- **flexible learning.** What were the implications for current school structures of anytime-anywhere flexible learning



The Year 7 Homepage

**Timescale.**

**November 2008.** The project was introduced at middle leaders meetings and through Heads of Subject promoted to staff. Heads of Subjects were required to

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produce lesson plans and resources for the project by December 2008. Parent and student awareness of the project was raised through articles in the school newsletter. A full school survey relating to student out of school access to technology was held. The results of the survey revealed approximately 7% of the student population lacking home access to PC hardware and the Internet. The survey did not deal with broadband access and it became apparent as the project developed that effective use of the learning platform would require a broadband connection.

**December 2008.** The project was promoted in school assemblies. Every student was issued with a business style card that provided a reminder of login details for the school website and learning platform. An ICT bulletin was published for parents. The assistant head teacher and network assistant responsible for designing the project spent two days at a technology workshop designing content for the site. Draft versions of the Key Stage areas were made available online to staff before the end of December. Results of the whole school technology survey were published. A survey of local community provision took place.



Part of the Year 9 Homepage

**January 2008.** Regular e-mails and news bulletins updated students and staff about the project. Bookings were made at the Denton Island Children and Families Centre and at Peacehaven library for student access to PCs and Internet during the break. Staff were recruited to supervise student use of technology in these centre's. 30% of students expressed an interest in working from workbooks as opposed to online. Workbooks were collated and printed during the last week of January. Design of the online lesson areas was ongoing.

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**February 2008.** During the last two weeks of term students were introduced to the February online lesson areas in ICT lessons. Staff ensured that students knew their password and user name login details and how to navigate the site. Students were also used to test the site for any design issues and these were corrected.

Provision was also made for online support during the break.



Support Screen

### Observations:

- ensuring that students remembered their **username and password** login details is obviously critical to the project. The practice access sessions prior to the break revealed up to 10% of students failing to remember username or password details. These issues were corrected by the network assistant.
- during the life of the project students have access to e-mail, telephone, chat and web conferencing **support**. The aim was to provide a maximum response time of one hour to student requests for assistance.
- **technical issues** with the site were identified in ICT lesson time when students were allowed to explore the online lessons. A pre-launch test of the site by students was essential.
- the **single biggest issue** facing the designers of the site was the range of learning materials supplied by staff. Some staff provided copyrighted materials that could not be used online. Many did not utilise the full potential of the Internet in relation to the use of video and audio material. Little or no differentiated material was supplied. Few suggested the incorporation of the platforms collaborative learning tools into lessons e.g. chat forums or message boards. There was an underlying assumption that a resource, be it a word processed document or a presentation, that was used in class, could simply be uploaded to the site for students to successfully use. Above all this revealed a need for ongoing staff training in relation to the potential uses of the platform.



The Year 10 Homepage

- **the time involved** in designing online content far exceeded what had been planned for.
- as far as possible lesson files were made available in a **range of formats**. Those students who do not have access to *Microsoft Office* were encouraged to download *OpenOffice*.
- the site designers were aware of their lack of skills in relation to **designing for learning**. They also recognised their limited understanding of the ways in which students best learned online.

### Lesson design.

As a rule of thumb the following guidelines were used:

- **font Arial 12 or 14** was used on all of the lesson pages (this was based on advice from the learning support department and research which suggested this was the most easily accessible font for most students).
- where large amounts of text were used these were accompanied by a **voice recording** of that text.
- a **forum** was incorporated into every subject lesson allowing students the opportunity to consult with other students and seek advice and help.

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- **standard graphics** were used to represent file downloads, forum, wiki and navigation (graphics were sourced from an online public domain library of education clipart).
- as far as possible some form of **pupil collaboration** was built into each lesson.
- as far as possible each lesson was also accompanied by a list of recommended **websites and a video resource**.
- where **hyperlinks** were used these would normally open up in a separate window.
- **colour** was used to highlight keywords on each page.

Lessons were designed in a range of formats to allow staff (and students) to explore designs that best met learning needs.



Year 11 Homepage

This is Part 1 of a series of three reports relating to the February Online Project.

Report 2 will use a range of case studies to illustrate the different approaches taken towards lesson design.

February 2009.

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