Learning platforms

09.01.07 The next step — schools without boundaries

There's a huge range of capability, from schools that have extended experience to those that haven't even begun the journey

Tony Parkin, page 5

My very own online learning space

Learning platforms break down the boundaries of teaching by allowing learning anywhere, on the net. A revolution, perhaps — but there are challenges, as George Coyle discovers

George Coyle

Learning platforms

They say it's the next big thing in ICT. The government's edict that all pupils must use one by 2008, and its personalisation agenda, mean that learning platforms are being seen as near compulsory. And the government's educational technology agency, Becta, has released its framework list of approved suppliers. But how many teachers know about learning platforms and how many schools are ready to implement them? Learning platforms first appeared in higher and further education, where institutions could change sufficiently, students benefited from having their curriculum and support materials just a mouse click away. Where they didn't change, there were complaints, and frustrated students.

As learning platforms move into schools, the online materials and support are the bottom line that teachers and learners can expect. The feedback from teachers already using them highlights improved communications and collaborative learning. Projects can, and do, operate across classrooms, schools, local authorities and countries. Parents are welcome to take part, too.

This supplement aims to spell out the key issues. If a school is to gain advantages from a platform, it will have to change its culture. Learning platforms cannot be forced on unwilling schools. What ought to excite schools is that, at last, ways of learning previously only used in pilot programmes and adopted by from few elite, online schools will become available for the mainstream, along with improved management tools to handle pupil data. What schools, management teams, heads, class teachers, administrators and “gurus” to show how the learning platform will work in practice.

Introduction

Culture change

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Part 2

02 What are learning platforms?

Four people give their response to the question: what do you want from your learning platform?

04 Buying advice

Are learning platforms available, each with its advantages and disadvantages. So which one is right for you?

05 The challenges

They don't all have the same view on how learning platforms can help support school leaders.

07 The future/resources

Education is undergoing a revolution, as learning platforms are a key part of the exploitation of 21st-century technology.

Produced by the Guardian in association with RM and Intel

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Welcome to a collaborative world

The exercise book, the teacher's marks and student records had all been physical things in time and space. Now technologies were developed to assist this process, such as forums, curriculum calendars and module managers.

The homework set for the last two weeks can be accessed again and again, whether you want to review it the next day, or before a test. Teacher's marks and student records have been carried with the government when it launched its folio of work, particularly attractive to teachers and module managers.

The uses and benefits of learning platforms are many and varied. We trace the development of this nascent technology then, below and opposite, hear what it means to the people who use it.

John Davitt

Research shows that students learn best when, for part of the time, they get together with a mentor in a small group or have a one-to-one tutor. That may well be true but it's also very costly. So the search began for a way of keeping the benefits of regular one-to-one support but at less cost. Step forward e-learning, a way of making the ultimate resource (another person) available over distance and time.

At first this was straightforward, especially for isolated learners. They would work on materials, often sent through the post and telephones, then email and even simple conferencing software – resources pioneered by groups such as the Open University.

From there it was a short step toward placing some content on the system alongside the communication tools. This made a module of work could be carried out online and supported by a set of hyperlinks to other useful places on the net.

Soon it was possible for students to publish their work online and the combined environments of work, resources, student work, and teachers' marking became known as virtual learning environments (VLEs). The exercise book, the teacher's marks and student records had all moved on to time and space, all were digital things in time and space. A myriad tools were developed to assist this process, such as forums, curriculum calendars and module managers.

Portfolio

Next came the idea of an electronic portfolio – a way of enabling students to build a file of achievements, progress and experiences that they could carry with them through and beyond their school career.

This increased the need for more management and administration tools, and so the super VLE (also known as a learning platform) was born with both added management functions and interoperability, the ability to pass a student's online record from one learning platform system to another.

The super VLE is made up of a mix of tools that all support online elements of teaching and learning. There are systems to online assessment by way of multiple choice and short answer tests; it's about developing the functionality of current platforms to online work.

The platform has also been good for the staff because it offers various routes to the end points. He warns, "Students and staff learn their ICT skills at different rates today and, if we're not careful, the staff could become a barrier to the success of the course." He adds that the learning platform is not used as an admin tool: "It's not a space on the web where people can access e-mail, keep records more easily and efficiently. It's a space on the web where people can access resources and share and exchange."

Foreman says there was always an overwhelming need for more management in schools, but now "people are spending more time on administration and less on teaching. The management function is now a part of teaching. They are not just teaching for the first time, they are also managing their workload and the way they teach."

Adverts

For more information about Studywiz, visit www.studywiz.com.

Chris Foreman

The manager – Homewood school and sixth form centre

Homewood is one of the largest schools in the UK, with more than 2,000 students aged 11-18. The school believes in doing things differently with its six-day timetable and five-term year, and it has developed an innovative and fully integrated curriculum called Total – task-oriented teaching and learning. The school is big fans of mobile computing and you can't move for students carrying laptops and tablet PCs. Homewood has an extensive wireless network around its campus and uses the studywiz learning platform.

Chris Foreman, the school's assistant vice-principal, learning systems, says its learning platform is about "changes in the way that we work and study and how our way of working is changing. It's not a technology project; it's based on moving towards 21st-century learners." He adds that the learning platform is not used as an admin tool: "It's not a space on the web where people can access resources and share and exchange."

All the school's lessons are placed on the web and there is a "Studywiz" area on the school's website for students to access when they want. A future development "will be a system that allows you to put things in a place that you can access when you want."

"Different teachers prefer to work in different ways. Some prefer to work on after school, others like working from home in the evening, while others prefer doing it at the weekend. When you have got a common place where you can get to resources and work with other colleagues, that increases the chances of someone being more productive in their own time. If it's more flexible, they've got more choice and whenever people have more choice, they're more motivated to use the system."

Foreman says there was always an assumption that students would only do the ICT they've been "taught. But it's much better that students are also learning their ICT outside school. If a student bought a computer game at home, she wouldn't wait for her parents or teachers to instruct her, and within an hour she'd be immersed in the game. Students are like that in school now. In some ways, we need to be less worried about teaching them how to use ICT, but clearer about what they should use it for."

The VLE, he says, provides the opportunity for that because it offers various routes to the end points. He warns, "Students and staff learn their ICT skills at different rates today and, if we're not careful, the staff could become a barrier to the students' progress."

Sometimes all it requires is for the staff to develop the tools that allow students to work in the way they choose and the VLE is an obvious way of achieving this. The VLE has opened a whole new set of strategies. It's not about digital work sheets, it's about developing the learning journey.

Weblinks

Homewood school: www.homewood-school.co.uk

Studywiz: www.studywiz.com
Steve Miles
The primary teacher – Furley Park school

Furley Park primary has around 400 pupils and uses a laptop with 26 internet-connected computer workstations. Steve Miles, the school’s pupil and curriculum development manager, initially used the platform for teacher-based tasks, such as a tool to manage curriculum planning and educational visits but has now begun rolling it out with his class. “I’ve got 27 pupils in my year 5 class and about half of them have logged on to the portal and shown their parents around.”

“It’s been very beneficial so far, but there’s so much more it can do.”

Steve Miles: “I’ve got 27 pupils in my year 5 class and about half of them have logged on to the portal and shown their parents around.”

Zak Waters

Georgia: ‘My parents like the idea of being able to see what we do’

Georgia says that having Studywiz has been very beneficial. “I’ve also used it for my homework and I like the fact that you can keep it all in one place.”

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Richard Rule
The headteacher – Pluckley school cluster

Learning platforms have helped bring together a cluster of 20 schools in Kent. “At the moment, most tests are paper-based, so I’m excited by it. The parents have generally been pleased.”

Rule believes creating a climate that enables people to learn from anyone, anywhere in the world, is the future of learning. “It’s much easier to share things and collaborate.”

Rule: “I’ve got 27 pupils in my year 5 class and about half of them have logged on to the portal and shown their parents around.”

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There is a range of systems and platforms to choose from, so don't rush into making just one choice, says one pioneering ICT teacher.

Jack Kenny

Among individual teachers who stand out as ICT pioneers in the UK, you can probably count Alastair Wells, head of ICT at Netherhall school in Cambridge. The winner of a national Becta ICT in practice award, he backs the use of learning platforms as an extremely sound structure for schools, offering assessment, tracking and monitoring, support tools, mentoring tools, conferencing, and e-portfolios. But he has a big proviso — the platform chosen by a school has to suit its individual needs.

Wells resists the idea that one product can do everything and that a learning platform has to be used by the whole school. Schools have to prepare for the platform that will bring, as they should, initially, dip into the water with services like Think.com (provided free for education by Oracle).

Wells has been impressed by the ease with which students and teachers get used to the platform’s facilities. Think.com has been around for some time, during which it has developed tools that can be easily accessed with minimum training by teachers and students and that involve activities such as voting, discussions, debates and bulletin boards. Students can post their work, teachers can post work for download, and email enables distance learning. Above all, it is reliable with good management tools. “It hasn’t got everything,” says Wells. “The good thing is it’s easy to train teachers on this and they are able to post work within 30 minutes. It takes students’ effort to transfer a lot of thing, but them to use it too.”

Open source

Netherhall also uses Moodle open source software. “It’s free and constantly being developed further by enthusiasts within the educational community. In terms of its design, structure, usability, user interface, and how easy it is to teach teachers to become effective users, it’s worth considering,” says Wells. One attractive feature is the ability of teachers who write content (usually lessons) to carry around part of the program on a USB stick so that they can use it anywhere and then upload their work to the main server. “The active community of users across the country is attractive. The OUA has adopted Moodle. The Buckinghams (paid for learning) is Moodle from the moment of log-on. Everything on the grid is public.

“Now there are innumerable schools developing online courses. Some people have them open and accessible. There is an ever increasing need for materials that are useful for lessons. With Moodle, if you’re worried about your resources being accessed, you can make it a private logon. If you want the rest of the world to share it, they can. Moodle has a simplicity to it, unlike some platforms that are too elaborate. If you want staff to be authors, then it has to be simple.”

The paid-for part of the Netherhall set-up is University and Yacapaca. The school bought a subscription about three or four years ago (from £2 per pupil for a large installation). Univerity provides the website, the public face of the school. Someone had to put all the work on the templates, on the design and look, on the key systems can have access to only certain pages and the security, says Wells. “You can have private logons on private pages. A central administrator can easily manage this as it is out of an local authority firewall. Many Labs have their firewalls really tight so that, when you want to interact with the world outside, it is difficult. There is no much point in having your website inside the firewall.

We wanted a quality product that was useful and that all teachers could access because of his school links.”

Yacapaca from Chalk Face One is an assessment tool (of optional training CD and one year’s support £235). The software enables end-of-topic tests, revision material, formal assessment and data gathering for subsequent classroom discussion quizzes and the school is now developing e-portfolios. Teachers use Yacapaca for personalised learning and assessment for learning. They can subscribe to pre-written resources useful for setting base data, and they can author and share their own assessment materials with other schools for free. It’s also possible to track and monitor student progress and analyse performance to discover what students have learnt. Frequently there is a breakdown of student performance by question, and students can set their own targets for tests.

The most important discussion that teachers need to have about the vision of the school and what their school requires from a learning platform. The school has to decide where it is going and what policies will be needed to take it there. Wells justifies the use of four systems because, after the identification of staff needs, you have to train them — he feels you have to have stepping stones in place.

For students the gap between learning a skill and using it effectively is tiny; they learn and they use. “For a teacher the gap is much longer. Everyone has to be able to use the email and for some staff that might be difficult,” says Wells. “Sometimes you will need to do one-to-one training, departmental training, faculty training, whole-school training, monitoring the ICT ops from every department. The key thing is for me having enough time to train the teachers in the fantastic products that are now out there.”

Weblinks

Buckinghamshire Grid for Learning: www.begfl.org.uk/resource/
Neale Wade community college: www.neale-wade.org.uk
Netherhall school: www.netherhall.cambs.sch.uk
Think.com: www.think.carlin.rye
OU has accepted Moodle. The Buckinghamshire Grid for Learning: www.begfl.org.uk/resource/
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The most important discussion that

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Which way should I go now?

Confused about what to do next? Becta has developed a matrix to help you find the learning platform that meets your school’s needs

Dorothy Walker

The government wants all learners to have a personal online space by 2008, and so schools that haven’t yet selected a learning platform face the challenging business of making a choice. Becta’s new learning platform services framework aims to help guide schools and authorities through the process of selecting a platform that can offer a service as well as technology.

“All the different elements of an enterprise-wide system have to work together effectively,” says David Hassell, director of business services at Becta. “In the past, if they didn’t, schools were left with the problems — a hardware manufacturer and software company might try to blame each other or just say ‘the teachers aren’t using the system properly’. That’s why we are looking for providers that can offer a school a good service.”

The framework features a list of providers that have satisfied a range of evaluation criteria. They have met functional requirements. They have met the framework to identify suitable suppliers. Even if the cost exceeds EU buying thresholds, there is no need to use the email and for some staff that might be difficult,” says Wells. “Sometimes you will need to do one-to-one training, departmental training, faculty training, whole-school training, monitoring the ICT ops from every department. The key thing is for me having enough time to train the teachers in the fantastic products that are now out there.”

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Think.com: www.think.carlin.rye
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The most important discussion that
Learning platforms: the challenges

How to support schools and their leaders

What do you need to know to make learning platforms work? Can they really be a tool for change, and how do they interact with existing management information systems? Gerald Haigh asks three experts

Hannah Jones is director of strategic leadership at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

Throughout its life, the college has emphasised a concept of leadership that’s distributed and collaborative both within and beyond the individual school. The vision is of a supportive community of highly effective ICT – that holds, building a useful tool, it has the potential to transform how schools are led and managed. Not every school has been quick to absorb this message but more are beginning to think about what’s happening now and how things will change. Jones says the means for doing this can be found in herc’s ICT self-evaluation framework, which he sees as a key part of the agency’s overall approach to ICT in schools – though that school leaders and staff can use to make wide-ranging strategic judgments about their use of ICT and then make plans for future development.

Schools that introduce platforms piecemeal or without adopting the whole-school approach make things difficult rather than easier for their teachers. “For an individual swimming against the tide, it’s not worth it. To be blunt, if I was a history teacher in a secondary school and I was asked to take on a learning platform without the whole school commitment to change, I’d be saying that I’d rather carry on as before.”

“The actual navigation of the platform is secondary,” she says. “We have to get to a point where it’s off-putting, but I do want performance data. It will presumably be fundamental to the idea of personalised learning that there’s secure access to information but agonising battles about ownership are about, but it’s a small part and there’s a worry it will become the main focus.”

“The government’s educational technology workforce and development programme, which handles the pupil database on an as before.”

“There are technologies that can make a difference to a single teacher,” he says. “Digital videos is one. The electronic whiteboard is another – and it doesn’t require a whole organisational change. But a learning platform is different. It needs a whole-school approach, he says, and a platform will affect the way it’s done.

“Managing assessment: Communication with parents? You want to talk to all that. Timetable? You’ll rethink that, too. I don’t want to magnify this to the point where it’s off-putting, but I do want performance data. It will presumably be fundamental to the idea of personalised learning that there’s secure access to information but agonising battles about ownership are about, but it’s a small part and there’s a worry it will become the main focus.”

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Learning platforms The future/resources

We are on the verge of profound change

John Connell

Comment

The head of development for Glow, Scotland’s new learning platform, explains how they launched a system that will link 800,000 pupils and educators across the country

What is an educated society? One of the tools we use to define it is the curriculum. Until now the curriculum has been centrally determined – a central group decides what learners need to know. But is this becoming untenable? In almost any classroom at least some of the students now know more than the teacher – and if they don’t, they certainly will by tomorrow.

I believe we have to move away from the idea of a big, centrally determined curriculum. Education has to be about the key skills and competencies people require; the curriculum should be negotiated between teacher and learner, with both working together to meet the learner’s needs. In an age when knowledge is no longer scarce, the teacher is no longer a guard of information, but a source of wisdom.

In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence places emphasis on the skills and wisdom. Education has to be about the idea of a big, centrally determined curriculum for Excellence is delivered. What was needed to engage with our 32 authorities in a thorough and competitive procurement process was a window on the curriculum, a way of finding out what we needed to buy and how.

Glow – formally called the Scottish Schools Digital Network (SSDN) and based on RM’s Kalos learning platform – offers the potential for truly personalised, collaborative learning. We chose RM’s Kaleidos learning platform, explains how they decided to do this.

The key to Glow is the use of the web as the platform. That is the way the world is going; I believe that in a few year’s time, every application you use will be delivered across the web, via the browser. We are already seeing off-product software available for use online – and the beauty of some of these tools is that they allow people to collaborate in ways that haven’t been possible until now.

Glow will be available this year, and the authorities will be able to choose how much control they give teachers over their own environment. One of the tasks in coming years will be to persuade authorities to hand over all the power that Glow offers teachers to the teachers.

Good leaders needed

What kind of leadership does an initiative like Glow demand? I strongly believe it is best not to try to control everything, but to get the community talking.

I strongly believe it is best not to try to control everything, but to get the community talking that hadn’t happened, if they hadn’t been interested or thought it was a bad idea, we would not have been successful. If we had simply set up a big project at the start, it probably would have failed.

At first, it seemed the way forward was to build a big system and load every school computer in the country with a package to deliver it. But we soon realised that wouldn’t be possible. Scotland’s 12 authorities each had different kinds of hardware, networking and software, and the only way to come up with something for every school very quickly was to use the web. When we told some of the big companies what we wanted to do, their first reaction was: don’t be ridiculous. But when it came to the bidding stage every one of these firms put in a bid.

How do I use learning platforms developing in future? I am willing to bet that in five years’ time there will still be companies at Bett trying to sell a platform you have to load on to your computer. But certainly in 10 years’ time, web-based learning platforms will be the standard.

In the short term it will be interesting to see how some of the Web 2.0 tools – the emerging social technologies such as blogs and peer-to-peer networking – are incorporated in learning platforms. It is clear to me that they will become part of everyday reality.

Interview by Dorothy Walker

John Connell is learning futures strategist at Learning and Teaching Scotland and a former headteacher. This month he joins Coopers (PcW) on the way forward with learning management systems. He will be the keynote speaker at RM’s Learning Platforms: Strategies for Success conference, at the Barbican Centre, London, on January 15, 11am and 2.30pm.

Why to find out more: contacts, resources and events


February 26-28 BibWorld Europe 2007, Blackboard’s fourth annual conference, Boppard, Germany. This year’s conference is incorporated in Learning Platforms: Strategies for Success conference

February 27-March 2 Aacropolis Palais des Congres www.aacropolispalaisdescongres/ BibWorld2007/BibWorldEurope07_home.htm

March RM conferences – free, one-day seminars on ICT in education and learning platforms Primary: Tue 12 (Birmingham), Thu 15 (Manchester), Wed 21 (London) Secondary: Tue 20 (Manchester) and Tue 22 (London), Thu 27 (Birmingham)

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