

# Benefits of a VLE



**What does a VLE offer to teachers  
and students, both inside and  
outside the classroom?**



# Introduction

If you were to be examining the role of the VLE in modern education in 2001 you might well have become overwhelmed with the number of experts declaring that the VLE was THE answer to modern education - it would solve all of our problems and usher in a new age of personalised, direct, anytime, anywhere learning for groups and individuals.

It's now 2010, and there's still some experts out there willing to tell you that ... but very few. The majority of educationalists have taken the pragmatic and practical stance of respecting the capabilities of the VLE and adding those capabilities to their teaching toolkit - in the right place, at the right time and with the right students the VLE is the perfect tool for the job - at other times a blackboard (or white) and a friendly smile will solve a students issues much more effectively and much more quickly.

The VLE will never take the place of direct teaching, or teachers, in the classroom. What it will do is facilitate, make more productive, ease and enhance many aspect of both teacher and student's life - make it work for you as a teacher and you'll love it, let it work you and you'll never get any benefit at all ... and that would be a shame, modern students expect to learn through this medium and modern teachers use that to their advantage.

This pamphlet will cover some of the theory of VLE usage and some of the tools available to turn that theory into practice - it's a basic "starter for ten", for those who wish to explore more advanced procedures there is a list of web references at the end of the content.

The best piece of advice when preparing for VLE use... *"just get in there and start doing it"*.





photograph by Alessandro Valli

# Communication

Perhaps the single most important thing that a VLE can do is to support communication - both between student and teacher but also between student and student, teacher and teacher and, more commonly nowadays, between parent and teacher and between employer and employee.

Communications are enabled and supported for synchronous (or real-time) chat and asynchronous online discussions tools. Students can use these facilities to build upon their existing knowledge and create new ideas through online debate and discussion. Some discussion areas can be linked to course material and online quizzes and self-tests.



*Teaching note: Getting to know your institutions' VLE through use, practicing with colleagues and engaging in induction sessions with students before using in earnest, is always an advisable thing to do. Some 'warm-up' activities are suggested in the accompanying "Twenty Quick Wins" booklet.*

The four key features/benefits of communicating via your VLE are:

- ◇ The asynchronous, anytime/anywhere nature of exchanges
- ◇ the text-based nature of communications
- ◇ the ability to archive, track and index communications
- ◇ the facility to structure discussions for individuals or groups through topic headings, specific topic areas etc.

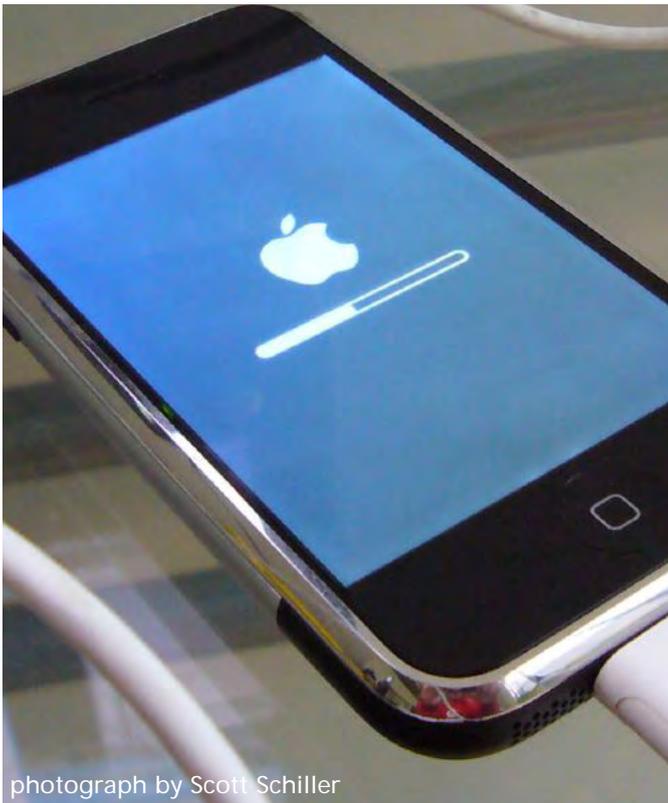
## Asynchronicity

Asynchronous discussions and debates offer us both benefits and drawbacks. Exchanges take place through forums or discussion boards and can develop over an extended period of time. Contributions can be made by individual students at different times and from different places.

All of this has implications for the pace and rhythm of any discussion. Whilst it can offer the opportunity for taking time over the formulation of, and reflection on, any contribution, it can also impede the natural flow and spontaneity of a face-to-face exchange of ideas. The time spent working out a well-rounded, formulated response can seem wasted when, on re-entering the board, further messages have appeared either changing

or developing the idea, or someone else may have been on in the meantime and posted a similar response to the one you've put together.

However, always try to turn a problem into a solution - the experience described above can be positive if it supports a more fair exchange of developing information and drafts, acknowledging similarity of ideas as a feature rather than feeling it to be a bug. Interaction can then take these forward, through argument and development.



photograph by Scott Schiller

## Communicating in text on the VLE

Discussing an issue through the exclusive medium of text brings authoring demands that are different to those experienced by speakers in an oral debate. For some students this will be a strange experience in the beginning - although many will be used to the concept and practice through text messaging and online chat systems e.g. Microsoft Messenger.

However, as an academic and employment skill, learning the best ways to communicate in this manner is hugely important - consider how often communications in a modern office are held over email or the academic discipline and clarity required to put your opinion across succinctly and clearly in a university degree.

In particular, the lack of 'non verbal' cues such as intonation, expression, gesture etc may prove demanding for inexperienced users. To some extent self-correction becomes automatic as people gain more experience with the medium but some students will need practice and advice to move forward.



## Recording, archiving and retrieving communications on the VLE

The majority of communication on the VLE will take place via text/written methods, rather than verbal. That which is written down, especially electronically is much more readily preserved and recorded. The computer-based archive that defines a text conference can be visited and revisited, by members of the learning group, 'privileged outsiders' or, in the case of an open forum, anyone with access to the system.

This can clearly be an advantage, both for revision and for 'vicarious learning'. Your students can review and develop their own and their colleagues' learning, as well as using the archive as a reference resource.



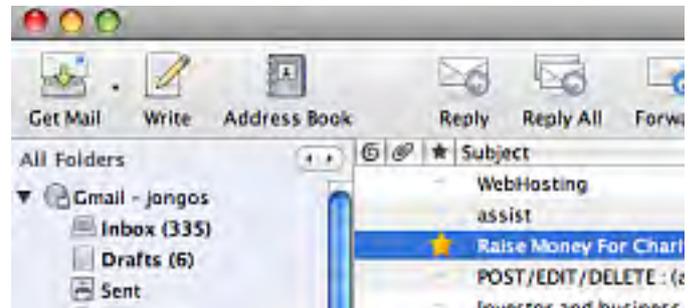
photograph by Anderson Silva

## Establishing communicative structures

As shown in the section of Discussion Boards in "What is a VLE" (accompanying booklet in this series) there is a certain recognised and formulaic structure to most online conversations via the VLE. There are great potential benefits from having this kind of structure in place - both for teacher and for student.

As a teacher, once this structure has been put into place for any particular class or subject it can be re-used year on year for subsequent students. The teacher can even keep the previous year's discussions in a related archive for new students to re-visit at pertinent points in the course.

For students, the organisational structure of conversations through threads, topics replies etc. will allow them to navigate easily and return to discussions long after they have concluded. As a revision and reflection tool this kind of pre-arranged structuring will take a lot of organisational weight off the shoulders of the student allowing them to concentrate on the actual content.



“ For pupils, the availability of high-quality learning materials in and out of the classroom and accessible from home are a key factor in raising attainment. They enable pupils to work at an independent pace, differentiate their learning and allow for different learning styles. Auditory learners, for example, will benefit from downloading podcasts, absent pupils can access resources online and teachers can capture and upload notes taken during the lesson for revision or consolidation of learning.”

# Assessment

Almost all VLE systems will come with online assessment tools built into them. Alongside these there are many more, commercially available, assessment tools on the market. Why so many - because the opportunities and benefits offered by online assessment systems are great.

Using system-wide electronic assessment systems means that assessment for learning can become consistent across departments and year groups, with systems that record student progress and give clear guidance on how to improve.

The better VLEs will include a live mark book. Traditionally, teachers would carry out assessments with their students and the marks would be recorded in folders or reports that were then archived and rarely referred to again. Using a VLE teachers can place this information on a live mark book, bringing a number of benefits.

As marks are live and linked to a student's online data they can serve as a constant guide to a student's progress throughout the year. This data can be linked to the school tracking systems increasing consistency. Annual reports to parents can become a thing of the past as parents can view these assessments over the course of the year, giving more detailed information more often.

On a practical level assignments and homework can not only be posted online for students (and their parents) to access, but students are able to respond electronically to tasks, submitting them for assessment through the system. This means that students can not only access these assignments at anytime from anywhere but they can also access any supporting materials that have been uploaded, discussion boards, chat rooms etc.

VLEs will contain tools for formative and summative assessment. Self-tests, with automatic marking and feedback built in, can be used by students for quick concept-checking and 'formative' feedback. These in-built "quiz" systems can provide guidance for both the tutor and the students; the results can highlight key areas that have not been fully understood by the student and which the tutor or teaching team can then cover in later sessions, online or face-to-face.

Students can submit assignments within a particular area of the VLE. This can be set up to indicate the time and date of submission and assessment marks can be released to students (as indicated earlier) online.



*“ With lesson plans and teaching and learning resources made available on the VLE, teachers with planned leave or PPA days just have to hand over these details to the support staff, a replacement teacher or other cover staff. This not only gives the students a sense of continuity but the support and cover staff have greater confidence in delivering the courses knowing that the courses will fulfil the curriculum requirements of the students. ”*

# Collaboration



Throughout this pamphlet collaboration has been implicit in all that's been discussed - communication has to be collaborative to exist (otherwise you're talking to a brick wall).

Peer collaboration in the classroom is an ideal that all teachers aim for, and it's no different in a VLE - getting groups of students to work together cooperatively towards a joint goal is exactly the same online as it is offline, and the VLE facilitates this by providing tools and resources to do this.

Some of the collaborative tools we have already covered are:

- ◇ Blogs
- ◇ Wikis
- ◇ Discussion boards

Other collaborative tools and techniques include:

## Resource sharing

At the very heart of every VLE is the concept of a resource repository. 99% of institutions starting out with a VLE use it purely as a repository in the first instance. Teachers and students are able to have shared file spaces into which they can upload files so that others can access these.

Consider, as a teacher if you can upload your lesson plans, reading lists, documentation and notes. You are providing your students with the resources they need to undertake your course, to return to for revision, to access when absent from the classroom. In return they have the ability to share assignments with you (as previously stated) but also to add to your teaching resources with resources of their own, either produced by them or found during independent learning.



photograph by JISC Infonet

# Other tools



## Video & Audio

A VLE (as stated above) is, in essence, a great file repository. So why not use it to store files other than documents and notes. Think about using video and audio - vodcasts and podcasts.

Modern students access video and audio online on a very regular basis - these are mediums they understand and are eager to engage with. A minute or two of video can explain a concept or illustrate a principle with great effectiveness - and with the popularity of sites such as TeacherTube, VideoJug and YouTube there is a whole world of resources out there that are waiting to be utilised. All will offer you the code for embedding these within your own VLE.





