

What is a VLE?



**An overview of the system and
explanation of common usage
terminology and abbreviations**

What is a VLE?

VLE stands for **Virtual Learning Environment**.

A Virtual Learning Environment is an online system designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting. A VLE works over the Internet and thus helps to enable the concept of anytime, anywhere learning (of course, the anywhere is prescribed by the availability of an internet connection).

A VLE provides a collection of tools which allows teacher(s) and learner(s) to interact with one another, and with learning materials, without having to physically be in the same space. Most VLE systems will provide common tools and structures to enable document storage and sharing, assessment tools (particularly of types that can be marked automatically, such as multiple choice), communication tools, uploading of content, return of students' work, peer assessment, administration of student groups, collecting and organizing student grades, questionnaires, tracking tools, etc..

While originally envisaged as systems to purely support distance education, VLEs are now more often used to supplement traditional face to face classroom activities, commonly known as Blended Learning.

In 'Virtually There', a book and DVD pack distributed freely to schools by the Yorkshire and Humber Grid for Learning Foundation (YHGfL), Professor Stephen Heppell writes in the foreword:

"Learning is breaking out of the narrow boxes that it was trapped in during the 20th century; teachers' professionalism, reflection and ingenuity are leading learning to places that genuinely excite this new generation of connected young school students - and their teachers too. VLEs are helping to make sure that their learning is not confined to a particular building, or restricted to any single location or moment."



photograph by Michael Surran

Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

Admin

[also known as SysAdmin, System Administrator, Administrator]

an individual who has full permissions within the VLE system to create, edit and remove material, courses etc. Usually someone with technical knowledge of how the system works.

Blog

A blog (a blend of the term web log) is a type of website or part of a website. Think of it as an online diary/journal. Blogs are usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video.

Blog can also be used as a verb (to blog), meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

Most blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments – this is one of the strongest features of a blog, the discussion and peer learning potential around the ability to comment back to the author and to the rest of the audience.

In the wider world (sometimes called the blogosphere) blogs tend to fall between either online diary/journal (almost vanity publishing) and specific, focussed commentary on a particular subject. Within the VLE Blogs are incredibly powerful, allowing an individual to record their thinking, their practice on any subject or project. These writings are great for reflective learning but can be even more productive when shared with peers who are allowed to comment back, ask questions and challenge the individuals working.

[See also: [video blogging](#)]



Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

Chat Room

[also known as chatroom]

A chat room, is a form of synchronous, usually text-based conversation. Across the internet there are many forms of chat room, ranging from the very basic text to the very advanced immersive, highly graphical 3D environments. Within a VLE chat rooms are most likely to be of the more simple kind.

A chat room provide a venue for communities of students to communicate, in real-time, without being in the same physical location. [see [Discussion Boards for the asynchronous equivalent](#)] Most chat rooms will have multiple sub-rooms used for particular subject/topic discussion while the main room is a general/social community. Inside the chat room, generally there is a list of the people currently online, who also are alerted that another person has entered the chat room. To chat, users type a message into a text box. The message is almost immediately visible in the larger communal message area and other users respond. Some users may enter chat rooms regularly and read messages without sending any, a practice known as *lurking*. This can be seen to have its equivalent to the quiet student in the classroom, however, you'll

often find that those unwilling to communicate or to ask questions in class are much more comfortable doing it through either a chat room or a discussion board - the degree of separation and the commonality of this kind of communication in the modern student's social life can make them an ideal tool for the more reticent.

Because chat room messages are spontaneous and instantly visible, there is a potential for abuse, which may or may not be intentional. Many VLEs will recruit moderators (often from the student community) to take an overview and enforce protocol. Note: due to the potential for abuse many institutions have decided to swiych off chat room capacity from their VLEs and favour Discussion Boards, which are much more easy to police.



photograph by World Bank Photo Collection

Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

Community

In a VLE a community can be any group of individuals working on the same resources or in the same group. This can be anything from a few students working on a project to the mass of individuals working on the whole system.

Course

A course within a VLE is any self-contained learning unit. This most often equates to a class (or group of classes working towards a single qualification) but can be used to mean individual learning elements within these groups if they stand as self-contained units. What makes a course and what doesn't usually evolves within each establishment and reflects the system design.

Discussion Boards

[also know as Forums]

Discussion boards are areas within the VLE where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages. They differ from chat rooms in that messages are not shown in real-time, to see new messages the board page must be reloaded. Also, depending on the access level of a user and/or the board set-up, a posted message might need to be approved by a moderator before it becomes visible.

Discussion boards typically allow users to post new topics and gather all the replies to that topic in individual groupings under that topic header.

Discussion boards have their own language; e.g. A single conversation is called a 'thread'. A discussion board is hierarchical or tree-like in structure, typically this equates to the following standard structure: forum - subforum - topic - thread - reply.



Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

eSafety

[see also Safeguarding, Cyber-bullying]

Safeguarding the students under your care is as essential online as it is off. Cyber-bullying is as real and as potentially harmful as playground bullying and should be treated with the same authority.

Teaching the students to use the Internet safely is one of the most important lessons you can give – there are many sites online that will give you all the guidance you need, this is a good place to start <http://www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/safeguarding-learners/>

Flaming

[also known as Bashing]

Flaming is hostile and insulting interaction between VLE users. Flaming can occur on discussion boards, in chat rooms or over email. It is usually the result of the discussion of heated issues but can sometimes be used as a general or concentrated bullying of an individual or group.

[See also eSafety]

MLE

MLE stands for Managed Learning Environment. The term MLE refers to the whole range of information systems and processes of a school, college or university (including its VLE if it has one) that contribute directly, or indirectly, to learning and the management of that learning.

Typically, an MLE could include any online registration process for students, student information systems, quality assurance processes and a VLE as well as any associated systems.



photograph by Paulo Fahlauer

Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

Video Blogging

Video blogging, sometimes shortened to vlogging or vidding or vidblogging is a form of blogging for which the medium is video. Entries often combine embedded video or a video link with supporting text, images, and other metadata. Entries can be recorded in one take or cut into multiple parts.

Video Blogging is very popular on YouTube and is becoming ever more popular amongst the student population due to the availability of good quality video cameras in mobile phones and the ease of upload facilitated by such sites as YouTube.



Wiki

A Wiki is a web page on your VLE that allows users to freely create and edit the page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has a simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages on the fly.

Wiki is unusual among group communication mechanisms in that it allows the organization of contributions to be edited in addition to the content itself. This means that any user (with permissions) can add to or edit the content created by any other user (open editing).



Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations

This concept of “open editing” has some profound properties within a VLE - allowing students the facility to create and edit any page in a Web site is exciting in that it encourages democratic use of the promotes content composition by nontechnical users. It also allows for great creativity and interaction for project groups - who can work oegther on a single document, or set of documents, without being in the same physical locality.

Wikis also have the ability to track and archive changes to their content. This means that all edits are trackable back to the students that made them and that content can be “rolled back” to a previous state if so desired.

Teaching note:

The combination of Wiki and Blog provides you with, perhaps, the most powerful VLE tool set you could need. Using the two together for reflective and group work, communication between peers and between student(s) and teacher(s) opens a world of pssibilities both in and outside the classroom. Teachers the world over are using these tools to transform their teaching and learning practice - for inspiration to influence your own practice simply type “Blogs, Wikis and Teaching” into your favourite web search engine and take a look at what others are doing.

Common terminology, acronyms and abbreviations



