Using a Virtual Learning Environment in the Music Classroom

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I've always had a personal interest in using ICT, and throughout my teaching career I've used it to support my teaching wherever possible. When I came to the Harvey Grammar School as Curriculum Leader for Music in September 2006 I wanted to revolutionise the way that Music had been taught there in the past.

In broad terms, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is an interactive website through which pupils can engage with a range of learning resources. These resources can be organised into topics or lessons which are available to designated groups or classes – this way, as a teacher you have much more control about revealing resources at a particular time rather than just having everything in a folder on a shared network drive.

There are many different software solutions for running a VLE but Moodle stood out from the rest for being straightforward, adaptable, and – most appealing on a school budget – free. Moodle is open source software, meaning that it is free to install and to use. It is supported by a large community of programmers who constantly update the core program code, provide new features, and solve problems encountered by users through the online forums.

When setting up the VLE in school, getting the support of the ICT technicians was invaluable and I strongly advise anyone thinking of trying this out to get yours onboard very early on. They found an old server with Windows Server 2003 running on it for me to use and I downloaded and installed one of the packages available from the Moodle website. It should be said at this point that Moodle will run on any computer platform so it is possible to go down the completely open source route and run it from a Linux server; it can also be accessed using any up to date browser on any operating system. After entering a few details during the installation you can have a basic site online within a matter of minutes. Gaining access from within the school network was easy: typing in the computer name (helpfully, 'moodle') in a browser brought up the front page from where all resources are linked.

The current version of my VLE is its second incarnation. Having shut down the server at the end of the summer term for some electrical work to be done over the holidays, it failed to start up again in September. I learnt one of my biggest lessons: backup. However, it did give me a chance to install the latest version of the software and redesign the site with the knowledge gained from having used it for most of the previous year. Now the site is much better organised and pupils are able to log in using their existing network login details – no more separate

passwords for them to remember (or forget). Thanks to the school ICT support staff, it's now also possible for pupils to access the site from home.

We use the site for all of our teaching in the department. I have done away with photocopied work sheets and students now access all of the resources for each lesson via one of fifteen networked computers in the room, each with its own MIDI keyboard. Having access to all their resources on the website encourages them to revisit previous work to support their continued learning; keyboard diagrams or pages to help with notation, for example. Each project is supported with pages that outline what students will need to do to achieve a particular level; questions like 'What was it we were meant to do?' have reduced as the lesson objectives, criteria for success and guidance are openly available. It is also much easier for the more able students to accelerate through to extension activities as they don't have to keep coming to me to ask 'What next?' – it's online for them to investigate for themselves, promoting personalised learning. Completed work is uploaded to the site so that I have access to it, but also so that students can show parents their completed work from home. Interactive forums give students the chance to hear each others work again and leave constructive feedback. Supporting audio and video tracks are available for projects, and with websites around that offer copyright-free recordings of works (out of the composer's own period of copyright) and *YouTube* offering a wealth of resources, a short period of searching is usually productive. Students can then listen as many times as they feel they need to answer questions. Starting points for compositions are available as MIDI files which can be loaded into a sequencer or score writing package for the students to use and develop, and interactive quizzes test the pupils on what they have learnt or what they can hear in a piece of music without them feeling like they are being continuously tested.

Students have responded positively to using the VLE and logging in at the beginning of a lesson has become second nature to them now. It has expanded to include areas for extra-curricular ensembles and instrumental teaching following requests from students. I've heard several older students who no-longer study Music comment on how they wish that it had been available to them when they had Music lessons.

Useful websites:

http://www.moodle.org
http://music.harveygs.kent.sch.uk