

School use of learning platforms and associated technologies

Case study: Primary School 6

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Primary School 6

This case study is part of a suite of 12 case studies which inform the benefits identified in the main report and should therefore not be read as a stand-alone.

1. The school and the school community

The school is located in a deprived area (it falls into the top 20 per cent in the country in terms of deprivation) with around 40 per cent of the learners' parents being unemployed and with a high number of learners receiving free meals. There are around 400 learners, a significant proportion of them coming from ethnic minority groups and having English as additional language. Although attainment of most pupils is well below average at the time of entry to school, it has been described as outstanding by Ofsted and has won many awards including the Basic Skills award, Artsmark Gold, the Activemark and Healthy Schools status and Becta ICT Mark. The school recently became a National School of Creativity, which enables it to work with agencies related to the Creative Partnership and to collaborate with professionals to promote aspects of the learning platform such as broadcasting, and film-making. A Christian foundation and tradition underpins the school activities and emphasis is placed upon the 'worthiness of each child and member'. The values and the pride of the school community come through the school areas as well as the school website and the learning platform.

The classrooms that host the lower years are open plan, with curtains used for separating them from the main area and the corridor. In this part of the building, there are also many 'corner' areas and an area with desktop PCs that learners can use at any time with their teachers. The classrooms for Years 2 to 6 are more structured, and in corridors there are many displays with photos, drawings and other constructions (some related to the creative status of the school, school trips etc.) In general, the environment has a warm and positive feeling, arising from the colourful surroundings, the open spaces and the displays.

All classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards, which are extensively used from Nursery to Year 6. Staff members have their own laptops and three laptops are allocated to each class. This is the fifth year that the school has been using mobile devices, which were initiated by a current acting head, who was then ambassador for mobile devices in the area. There are two ICT suites in the school, one in the building for infants (with six PCs) and one in the upper building (with 16 PCs). Year 5 is also piloting two large-screen Macs. Many of the senior staff members as well as other teachers have been in the school for a long time, including the e-learning manager.

2. How the learning platform is used

General observations

The introduction of a learning platform was initiated following the government initiative and is Local Authority-led. The learning platform has been implemented at school-wide level since 2007, and its development is based on a strategic plan that builds on the Harnessing Technology paper, the Becta Self-review framework and the ADOPT framework (developed by the LA). The aim of the strategic implementation is to involve all stakeholders (staff, parents and learners) in an enabled environment which is also safeguarded. ICT more generally has been one of the five key issues in the school development plan for seven years and resource allocation for e-learning was included in the financial planning of the school.

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One of the IT suites

At the moment, the school employs a commercial Management Information System for administration, including online registration, medical and contact information, and a traffic-light system for setting targets etc. Only a few members of the staff have access to the MIS, while access to the learning platform has been provided initially for staff, then for learners and the plan is to launch a parents' portal that is currently being trialled by a small group of parents. The school has recently signed a contract with a provider that will enable the two systems (the MIS and the learning platform) to communicate with each other by 2012. An outward-facing school website is aimed

at the broader community and the plan for this is to connect it with the learning platform rather than having them as two separate features.

Links to the broader community are made through the website, the school radio and TV and the (School) Friend online magazine, in the preparation of which learners are actively participating. These initiatives are learner-centred and mesh learning with fun and real life (literally and virtually bringing the community to the school and enabling learners to reach out to the community and the world).

“We set up a discussion ourselves to see what the children wanted it to be called, and they came up with (School) Friend. Obviously a few of the editorial team worked alongside a graphic designer to come up with a logo, and that’s when they then posted them online to say to the children, ‘So which one do you think is best?’. So as I say, it’s all run by the children, they obviously chose the name, they chose the logo. There’s a lot of focus on the children having their own say rather than saying to them ‘Oh, this will be a good idea for this’. A lot of, you know, their own ideas and their own imagination.” [Teacher – editorial club leader]

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Main page of the school website

Management and administration

The implementation of the learning platform in the school was based on the LA’s vision for learning platforms in schools. The area has been promoting the use of the learning platform for schools as a community, taking on board most of the schools in

the area, creating a powerful team, and providing opportunities for knowledge exchange at the same time as enabling schools to see the ‘bigger picture’.

“So, I think the ethos that [the local area] are creating, you’re not doing it by yourself, you’re doing it as a group of schools. We’re working together and collaborating together so there’s a group of schools in each cluster that work and you feel comfortable because you’re the leader leading it and you’re meeting with all the schools at your level, so you can see where you go to next.” [E-learning manager]

The ethos underpinning this collaboration is ‘learning together’. In turn, the school is expected to showcase its development of learning platform in LA meetings because of its status as a Creative school.

“E-services at [the Local Authority] did all the interviews with the providers, chose the best provider ...if the local authority had three or four different learning platform providers, they couldn’t provide the training to the level they do ... So, we’re very lucky. We don’t realise how it works until you go to a different local authority, you phone up and say, ‘Can I speak to your e-learning headteacher consultant?’ – ‘What’s one of those?’ Literally, or, ‘Can I speak to e-services?’ and there’s no such thing. So, we’re very lucky. That pressure is taken away from schools.” [E-learning manager]

Support by the Local Authority, and presence of key drivers in the school, who are also members of the leadership team, have led to the current success of the learning platform development in this school.

The development of the learning platform since 2007 was based on a self-review framework, which identified stages that the school has been undergoing and steps for further development. Previously, the school was piloting the learning platform with two other primary schools in the LA. A three-year plan that fitted into the school development plan was developed based on the ADOPT framework provided by the LA to e-learning co-ordinators. The framework (promoted at BETT this year) aims to enable schools to self-assess the level of development of learning platform and to plot further steps towards transformation. The five steps of development are Awareness (familiarisation), Development (utilisation), Optimisation (integration), Pioneering (reorientation) and Transformation (evolution).

Using this framework, the school developed a review for each of the following areas of the learning platform, identifying the stage at which these areas are and the pathway for development: Organisation, Communication and Collaboration, Information and Management, Learning, and Broadcasting. The main focuses have been on the Organisation and Broadcasting areas in which the school has reached the Pioneering stage and is moving towards Transformation. The focus on Organisation was related to realising the benefits of making everyday school life

processes easier. The Broadcasting area has been developed by utilising the links of the school with external agencies and its status as a National School of Creativity.

The approach taken by the Senior Management Team members towards the implementation was to link the uses of the learning platform to the activities of the school in creativity, so technology use was thus linked to creativity. Internal training for senior managers was organised, who then trained subject leaders, who in turn supported other teachers. Although the strategic plan is developed by the e-learning manager, this is then cascading through the leadership team. The design of the learning platform has been a result of the leadership team work, in order to set standards and point to the direction the school should aim at, however staff members were able to provide input during the process.

At the beginning, staff members were given a presentation and clear direction, and from then on, small steps towards achieving goals were followed. Traditional systems such as the physical notice board were removed and replaced by spaces on the learning platform (in this way no hybrid measures were provided so that everyone is using one system). Staff were given time and support from the leadership to realise the benefits and there was little, if any resistance from staff. Another factor that contributed to enabling staff to use the learning platform has been the hands-on support provided, and the presence of one advanced ICT skills person in every year group. During staff meetings, the staff have the time to work on or discuss issues regarding the learning platform and often the e-learning manager and the leadership team send reminders to staff to keep their interest in using the learning platform.

“And then we had time to develop in staff meetings the subject pages as well, so people weren’t expected to struggle on their own. And that was a good environment to do it in, because we were all together, so we were supporting each other – when one person got stuck the other could help ...” [Teacher]

The acting headteacher describes the leadership style as ‘leading by example’. Having teaching experience, and thus understanding teachers’ position, having passion for e-learning, and being engaged in activities that he asks other teachers to engage in are qualities of this acting head that enable him to promote the learning platform implementation.

An e-learning manager who is also Assistant Head has been one of the key drivers in the school, characterised by passion and determination to develop the learning platform and realising benefits (‘e-learning is my baby’). The e-learning manager stressed the importance of having the help provided by the LA and the support by the Senior Management Team members in the school, who have been involved in the development of e-learning and subsequently the development of the learning platform. She has been working in close collaboration with the LA e-services team

and other school e-learning co-ordinators and LA consultants and provided input for the development of the ADOPT framework. The e-learning manager mentioned the use of the Engage website as an important gateway and support area and to access other e-learning co-ordinators. New members of staff were appointed on the understanding that they would contribute to the learning platform development, and as leadership members suggest, the school employs outstanding staff in order to achieve outstanding status.

The school collects data to evaluate the learning platform through engaging learners in online discussions, through user reports to identify popular areas on learning platform, consultations and interviews with teachers, and also commissioned external agents to carry out an evaluation of the learning platform impact in 2008. In this process, awards that the school has received (Espresso ambassador school, and the ICT Mark) are seen as benchmarks by the e-learning leadership and staff at the school.

Curriculum and teaching

The use of technology aims to make the curriculum more creative, in relation to the Creative Partnership status of the school. All subjects have a space on the learning platform, built on the same template, which enables the subject leader to audit and analyse results and monitor standards, and the Creative Partnership to get involved. The subject space is populated with documents, key objectives, assessments, and assessment results. There are also other planning documents and policies, e-safety documents and access to e-services for solving technical issues. Having subject areas means that teachers become more aware of what is happening in other subjects.

The use of the online education content service through the learning platform enables staff to create and find teaching material and to plan their teaching. Teachers can access this from home, alongside other useful links, and share the content they develop or find with their colleagues.

Each year there are thematic projects linked to cross-curricular areas that learners are involved in. Planned projects for the current year include: the development of an outdoor class (Year 3), creating e-books (Year 5), and developing a Global Gateway, for linking schools (featuring collaborating with Vietnam, and speaking, literacy, learning about other cultures through web conferencing). ICT skills and e-safety are part of the curriculum and are promoted through activities related to the use of the learning platform, as learners create and add to wikis, or post items on online discussions. In addition, some learners were involved in game designing (and 12 learners had the opportunity to visit the software company in London and to collaborate with game developers).

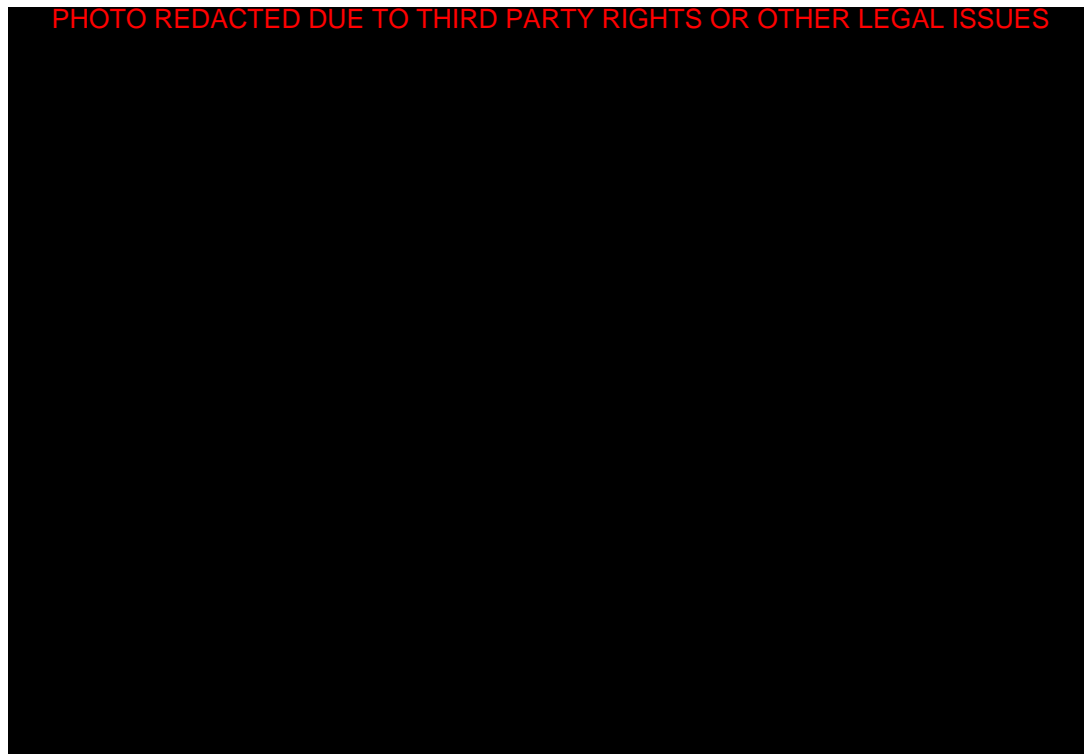
The learning platform has been used to support communication between acting heads, and the e-learning manager in relation to the school provision of support to families. The individuals involved can share confidential information and documents on a site they characterise as valuable for organising and safeguarding the school.

Learning and learners

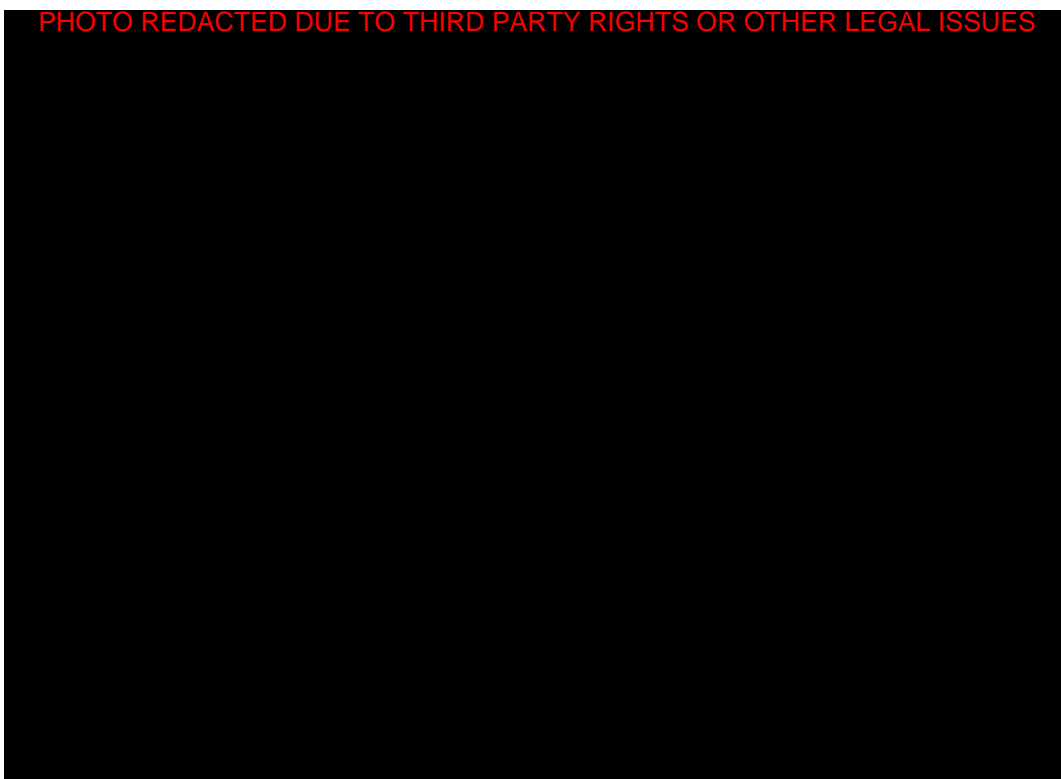
Class sites on the learning platform have been only recently launched. Class teachers maintain class sites and they use them mainly to provide links, upload photos, and post surveys and questionnaires. In general, the use of learning platform for learning is still at the 'Developmental' stage in the ADOPT framework. The Pupils' site on the learning platform has been developed on the basis of 'Every Child Matters', which accords with the ethos of the school.

Broadcasting and podcasting have been used as a way of improving learning, especially in regard to literacy and communication skills, and as a way of keeping records of learning and being able to share learners' work and school activities through the website and the learning platform. The school has a multimedia room which was decorated by learners in Year 4 and is used for creating podcasts. The school also has Flip cameras, which are extensively used to record learning. Learners have been creating podcasts and videos on various themes, and publish them on the learning platform, reaching the home, families and a broader audience. Podcasting is used across subjects and learners are provided with a certificate and letter for home, to inform parents of the presence of the podcast on the learning platform. Learners record and edit podcasts, making decisions about what to keep and what to cut out. Peer assessment also takes place in this process.

Another initiative that was developed with a focus on learning was the (School) Friend online magazine hosted on the learning platform. Some Year 6 learners joined the Editing Club led by a newly qualified teacher who has a background as a graphic designer and illustrator and they all work together on updating the online magazine, for an hour every week. In this process, they also get professional guidance from external agents through the Creative Partnership links. Through the work for the magazine, learners get to write in different styles, addressing various audiences (beyond their teachers and their classmates). The participating learners can take ownership of their learning, they can work independently (as they can access the magazine at home), and they have the opportunity to work alongside professionals, through the Creative Partnership links. They also gain ICT skills and they engage with local issues (politics and swine flu, for example).



Part of the multimedia room



The online magazine

Importance is given to training learners to use technology in a safe and appropriate way, and various tools exist to ensure their safety. For example, a ‘worry-box’ is an immediate way for learners to communicate their concerns when using computers, the internet and the learning platform to the leadership team of the school. In cases where learners misbehave or use the learning platform inappropriately, their log-on is disabled for two weeks.

Parents and families

Parents and families have access to general information (digital letters) and documentation of the school through the website and to learners’ work through the school TV and radio. School staff and learners currently see the learning platform as a tool for enabling the school to showcase its success, so parents/carers can find photos from trips, podcasts with readings by learners, videos on learners’ work etc.

“Letters that we send home we can also upload onto the platform, so there’s no excuse for any parent to say they didn’t know, because it’s there on the platform for them. And because we can access it from home, if we’re aware of things coming up, we can just add things, delete things, and let parents know at five to six in the morning that school will be open.” [Teacher]

“The kids can upload photographs from school trips. Obviously parents can’t go on the school trips, so they’ve got no photographs, and parents can see them at home and have a look at what they’re doing on the school trip.” [Teacher]

“I think it’s really good, because there’s like children, as if they’re reporting, reporters, and, you know, they’re really confident and whatever. So you can see your own children on there, you know.” [Parent]

The school is working towards developing the Parents’ portal and a policy to ensure that the learning platform is used appropriately. The integration of the two systems (the MIS and the learning platform) is seen as a pre-requisite for the development of the learning platform for parent–school communication.

However, there are issues of parents with a low level or no ICT skills, and those who prefer to visit the school, talk face to face to teachers, use phone calls and receive letters from the school in print. A parent also expressed concerns about access to the children’s data on the learning platform.

3. Benefits of using the learning platform

Findings from the case study are described below.

Improving standards

Although no direct measures of impact of the use of the learning platform on standards exist, staff members observe that through the various activities in which the learning platform is involved, literacy, numeracy and general knowledge of the learners improve. For example, through the development of podcasting, learners improve their listening and speaking skills. Through the work for the online magazine or the pupil sites, and the games they create, learners are able to assess each other's work, exchange ideas, and work on adapting language for various purposes.

“So, you just swop it around and then you just like check. It's like one person checking the one that... So, I would go with this person, this person would go with mine and then I'd play his game and he'd play mine and I say what's wrong with his game and he says what's wrong with my game, I say what's good about it, he say what's good about mine.”

Interviewer: And do pupils usually accept each other's feedback or do they get angry or...?

“No, we just like... we accept it and we improve on it, so then we do it again and go, ‘Yes, you've done that bit good now’ and then you go... If you point out another thing that's wrong, you go back onto the computer, do what you have to improve it and then you just like, say, do it again and he goes, ‘Yes, that's all right, there you go’, and then we show it to the teacher...” [Learner – School Council]

Book reviews by learners on learning platform help them develop skills in summarising stories, and encourage reading.

“... That's the skill of summarising – to tell you what the story is about in a short paragraph rather than rewriting the story in your own version, and then obviously it kind of encourages the children to read as well because obviously they've seen this book and then said, ‘Oh well, that looks like a nice book. It sounds, you know, the blurb sounds quite good so I'll have a go at reading that’.” [Teacher – editorial club leader]

“Well, we are focusing on writing and developing writing and certainly the learning platform will make a big difference to that in terms of producing podcasts, e-books, audio books, that kind of thing. So, yes, there's a lot more talk and the focus on speaking and listening... A lot more talk that can be used with audio recording and anything to do with ICT, linking it straight to the platform, is going to increase the confidence and the writing ability of our children.” [Teacher]

Raising learner voice and aspirations

Through their involvement in creating the online school magazine (hosted on the learning platform), learners have improved in reading and writing and have developed communication skills. This resulted, according to staff, from enabling learners to write for real audiences within and outside the school community, nationally and globally. Planning, rehearsing their writing, and continuously re-visiting it and improving it, had an impact on learners' skills. In this process, learners had a say on the issues that were raised, and the content of the magazine, which includes sections on sports, fashion and other themes. Through online surveys on the learning platform the learners chose the name and the logo for their magazine, taking ownership of it. An underpinning goal ('right-write') for raising school standards has thus been enabled through the use of the learning platform. Working for the online magazine or creating podcasts and videos, learners learn to write for an audience like journalists and aspire to go to jobs like this. Communication between learners and staff is also increased. Learners interviewed expressed their will to interview new teachers at the school.

The School Council has a space on the school website where they can communicate the council responsibilities and activities and get feedback from other learners or staff.

Achieving community cohesion

The learning platform is an inclusive tool that helps in developing and maintaining community cohesion; all staff are using it to share ideas and practice and they have access to updated information that reaches everyone at the same time.

"The first few staff meetings we were told, new staff, and the older staff were reminded, we've got these links on the numeracy site and you think 'Oh, okay, I didn't realise, so perhaps I can go and use that', and again as I say, it's been inclusion. It's been like part of a small [school] community so to speak, you know, and we are kind of feeding off one another, getting ideas and then somebody might upload a useful link to do with, you know, perhaps you are doing myths and legends or whatever." [Teacher]

Also, teachers find that the learning platform enables them to include all learners by providing the tools to enrich teaching in varied ways (through visuals or music for example) and achieve differentiation.

Communication between learners and teachers has increased:

"Yes, because you can leave messages. So, maybe to [the teacher]. She leads the school council. You can say, when are we going to have the next meeting, when are we going to put this idea into action or when is this going to happen, when is that going to happen? Like Blue Day, we was not sure... I was not sure. But I went on the website, put it through and [the teacher] told me." [Learner]

Organisation

One of the major benefits achieved through the use of learning platform is the organisation of school processes, related to curriculum planning, monitoring and delivery of teaching. The learning platform has made these processes easier and more sophisticated.

Uploading planning online has become compulsory, which gives the opportunity to the leadership and the specialist staff to comment and make suggestions (for differentiation or useful links, for example) and ensuring standards. In addition, staff find it easier to revisit their planning and to edit/modify it at any time. Home access to the learning platform means that staff can complete tasks and access information remotely. For example, when the school was closed because of snow, staff used the learning platform to fill in a school development questionnaire and to create an action plan. The learning platform has increased collaboration and the sharing of ideas amongst staff.

“It’s made my planning a thousand times easier, because you do have access to other documents. You have access to every curriculum area and all old plans as well. So, you can have a look at old plans and consider whether or not they need adjusting, whether you can actually use them again or whether you need to produce something completely new. So, it saves a huge amount of time. It means you’re not reinventing the wheel.” [Teacher]

“It’s just really easy and you’ve got it at home as well, so if you need to do something at home you can do it straight away, you can do your planning and then you upload it there. And you can look at previous years’ planning; it just makes life a lot easier because everything’s in a central place, it’s easy to access.” [Teacher]

“It meant that people’s plans were readily accessible to other people as well, if they wanted to look at them, to support them. And give them different ideas because it’s all about sharing, collaborating and getting other people’s ideas. So I think it just makes it easier to be able to do that.” [Teacher]

“It means you can be reactive as well to what’s going on around you. For instance, the weather having been so extreme and having changed and affecting coming in to school, affecting perhaps the angle that you take when you’re teaching something the next day. So, you can communicate with your colleague and say, ‘Well, let’s take a different angle on this particular topic. Let’s inject something else into it to make it relevant to what’s going on’. So, it is instantaneous communication and the planning’s a movable feast, isn’t it, really. It just makes it even more so.” [Subject leadership team]

Populating the calendars, having a live working timetable on the learning platform, enables all staff to be informed and to inform others of activities taking place at any time in the school.

“Yes, the staff room is the starting page so it just ensures that everybody knows what’s going on. We have our weekly diaries on there as well so you can have a look, so they’ll put them on this week, next week’s one, so you can see what’s going on. We’ve got calendars on there so if you’ve got events, sporting events, you can put them on straight away and that’s good as well. So that when the office staff are doing the weekly diary they can look at all the sporting events that people have uploaded on to the calendar, and it’s just really straightforward and easy to use.” [Teacher]

Minutes of meetings can be found online, enabling staff members who missed meetings to keep up to date. Staff, like learners, can revisit documents (such as their lesson planning) and modify them more easily electronically than on paper. In addition, accumulation of documentation (including resources by the Local Authority) and access to information from previous years is important for staff. Having subject areas enables subject leaders to monitor teaching without having to chase individuals to get their planning.

“I’ve been chasing up some RA assessments at the moment and making sure that they’re all in the same place. And instead of having to go and see people, I can just pop a message on, ‘Can you make sure these are loaded? Here is where you put it.’ And it’s just really straightforward, really easy, and makes people’s lives easier.” [Teacher]

“I think all important information that the staff will need, especially regarding your subject, can be stored in your area. So, they’ve got easy access to it. Like I said, all the QCA documents are there and they can just download them.” [Subject leadership team]

The learning platform provides easy and immediate access, whereas in the past teachers would spend valuable time looking in folders and files and had to carry paperwork. Using the learning platform for organisation has also been beneficial for the newly qualified teachers’ work, by enabling them to access the school policies and documents at any time needed, and to follow up on planning from previous years, and get ideas for their teaching, or find help if they have been struggling with issues in regard to their teaching. The use of the learning platform therefore enhances the process of settling in the school for new staff.

“We’ve had three newly qualified teachers start this year as well and they’ve found the learning platform really helpful, because they can access it at home, they can have their school emails there, they can upload planning, they can look at previous years’ planning, which I know has been helpful. So instead of

you saying ‘Oh, here’s my planning, copy it from my memory stick’, if they’re struggling for ideas they can look at last year’s planning for this week. Because you can filter the weeks that you look at and everything is very easy to use.”
[Teacher]

In addition, the Management Information System has made it easier to track and analyse data (such as diversity of religious backgrounds of learners, for example) and is resulting in easier and more immediate identification of problems.

Saving on resources

Staff members have access to information at their fingertips and avoid printing documents, thus saving paper. Teachers also have more time to reflect on their work and can do their work in a more flexible way, working from home, in their own time, as the learning platform as a one-stop shop.

This benefit has been achieved through replacing some traditional physical spaces with online areas on learning platform. For example, all staff have the virtual Staff Room as a home page when they log in on the learning platform, and as they report, it has become a part of their routine to check the announcements posted on that site every day to keep up with the fast-changing school activities.

Sharing with families and broader audiences

The learning platform is currently used widely across subjects to publish learners’ work in the form of scanned documents produced by learners and photos and videos from visits/trips, which enables learners to share these with their families, making the school processes, and their learning more visible.

“A big part of it is sharing what we’re doing and what they’re actually doing in school at home because the parents wouldn’t necessarily know unless it’s put in front of their face and it’s multimedia and they can see it.” [Subject leadership team]

Also, through the School radio and TV learners are reaching a worldwide audience, which makes their learning more engaging and motivating. The community is brought to the school and the school reaches out to the community, making learning relevant to real life. Parents can get more involved in schooling and help with their children’s learning. Using a digital format for recording school activities and learning makes it easier for more parents to understand schooling and give feedback to the school and to learners about their work. Learners’ confidence is increased and school members show their pride for their school and achievements.

An example of subject area activities is in PE. The learning platform and school website are used to advertise/announce competitions and enable communication with other schools for participation.

“Where the parents want to share, if the children want to share it with them, they can see what their children have been doing, because I think it’s important. Then the parents as well sometimes I think don’t realise the impact of what the children do in school has on the rest of us, so I think it helps them understand the importance of learning and the relevance of what they’re doing as well.”
[Teacher]

“It’s a record of the work that we’ve got on there. Because it’s such a high standard and it’s accelerated the learning in ways that we could never really imagine. They’ve got it there for many years to come, so they can access it each year, different year groups going into... New year groups can actually see the films that we’ve created. And it’s not just at a school level, it’s almost at like a Hollywood level.” [Teacher]

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Scanned learners’ work

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Video made by Year 4 learners

Access at home – extended learning

Both staff and learners report on the importance of extended learning, learning that goes beyond the school timetable, either with homework or other ways of learning. Learners are able to revisit their work and this enables them to reflect on it and improve. Flip cameras are used, for example, to keep a record of teaching and children can watch themselves and improve. Parents also see the benefit of children being able to access their homework on the learning platform at home. Learners are aware of the opportunity they are given to continue learning at home.

“Yes, we had some of the children who were actually away so it was a really good easy recap, on the website as well ... and then they can look at it at home as well. And what was nice was some of the children went home and they showed it to their parents and carers, they were like ‘Oh this is what we did in RE today’, so even though they don’t realise it, they’re still learning. And they’re consolidating their learning at home and sharing it, so it’s deepening their understanding.” [Teacher]

“...and we’d only got halfway through that in school because it was getting quite tricky. But it was nice to see they had worked through it with their siblings and got through it at home, because that’s just taking their learning on to the next step. So it just strengthens it and builds it, builds on it a lot more, which is good.” [Teacher]

“It’s really good because the ones who want to carry on and do some more, it gives you a chance to push them with extension tasks.” [Teacher]

“I think that they can see the real impact of what, when they hear their child’s voice on the video or they see them, they can link a bit more to it, maybe a piece of writing it’s just shows them straight away. I think it’s just an easier way to understand, a good impact, it just hits them straight away, that when they see their child’s face on that video, ‘Oh, that’s what they’ve been learning’. And it’s a good conversation topic and it might engage conversation and take learning further at home also than maybe a piece of writing would. But they’ve each got their place and importance in learning.” [Teacher]

Digital literacy and e-safety

The use of the learning platform and more specifically, areas developed for learners such as My Sites (the equivalent to Facebook/Bebo), initiate discussions around e-safety, and learners are taught about issues regarding the use of the web and online communication. Learners know that the whole system (learning platform) is monitored (Internet Police officer) and they know they have to keep their log-on safe and not share it with others. Learners learn to quickly manage the uploading, deleting and editing of content and therefore become more confident in using technology.

“They can see how websites work and how obviously you can link different things. I mean, they have done this all themselves. They have found out facts on the internet, they’ve put images in themselves.” [Teacher – editorial club leader]

In the design of online spaces on the learning platform, external professionals worked together with children to help them gain relevant skills as well as to develop confidence and become inspired and motivated.

“Well, I wanted [the software] and they showed me there, so it’s kind of easy. But if you’re like a new beginner, it takes some time to get used to all the buttons but I’ve been using it for a long time, two years now.” [Learner]

Motivating learning

The use of software through the learning platform for creation of games engages learners in learning. They report being more satisfied having created their own games, in addition to playing games that help them learn at the same time.

“Well, I go on to Grid Club because there’s like education stuff. My dad likes it, so I go on to there ... Because it’s keeping healthy, that Super Hero game, I play it all the time and let’s say, ‘Okay, you need two proteins, two dairies and stuff like that, five fruits, five carbohydrates and one sugar and then...’ So, you

know what like a balanced diet is. It's helping you and you're playing a game. So, it's fun learning, really." [Learner]

Learners enjoy using the discussions on the learning platform to share experiences or ask other learners their opinion about issues. In general, the learning platform provides tools for more artistic and interactive teaching.

An example where the learning platform was used to engage learners was in science in collaboration with Creative Partnership agents. The subject was Earth and Moon and teachers organised an incident (the wreckage of a spaceship that crashed in the school area) to spark learners' imagination. The school involved the local fire brigade and police and this was shown on local news. Staff report that learners became interested, acting like forensic scientists, looking at evidence on a DVD found in the wreckage (created by a Creative Partnerships agency) and this accelerated their learning. This activity was imaginative, creative and inclusive as all children were involved and the links related to this were hosted on the learning platform and revisited by staff and learners. It is also something that can be used in the future.

4. Challenges and solutions

Staff members took time to become familiar with the use of the learning platform, and the step-by-step and continuous drip-feed approach taken by the e-learning leadership team enabled staff to learn how to use aspects of the learning platform that were promoted through the strategic plan.

A challenge the school faces, related to developing the parents' portal, is the ICT skills of parents.

“Children now can... they're so whizz on computers, everything. ...But it's quite good because, like I say, my seven-year-old child teaches me, a 45-year-old, how to do things.” [Parent]

“And what is nice and it's the way that I've taught the children, the children will then go home and teach their parents, which is – you know, we all learn from each other, which is really good. So they've got the skills to do the teaching as well.” [Teacher]

Home access is an issue that the school tries to address by providing opportunities for all the children at school.

“But it's important as well that, because some of the children haven't got internet at home, that we give them the opportunity in school. So yesterday, in ICT, they all had a chance to go on to the learning platform themselves. Because the ones that don't have it at home we don't want to not improve them, so then they get the opportunity as well to use it, which is good.” [Teacher]

5. Drivers

The LA's vision for the learning platform has been a key driver for the school. Not only because of the support provided, but also because of exchanging ideas and sharing workload with the developing group within the LA.

The ADOPT framework provided measurable milestones, and is a model that the school can aspire to.

The e-learning manager has been a key driver in the school, organising the actions needed for the development of the learning platform. This has included showcasing at staff meetings, working during the staff meetings building the staff confidence, with meetings at the start or end of staff meetings for teachers to work on specific areas of development of the learning platform.

Expectations were set from the beginning and everybody started moving together at the same time and at a manageable pace, which made the process easier for staff.

New staff are employed with the requirement to contribute to the learning platform, so NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers) reported how they had to familiarise themselves with the process.

The learning platform has been structured by the e-learning manager in a purposeful way, facilitating all staff to learn to use it. The school has been described by staff as moving fast and the pace of change makes the use of the learning platform even more important, for being able to keep informed about things happening in the school.

6. Conditions for success

The school went for the Local Authority's choice of learning platform, in order to ensure support, which is a condition for success according to staff. The very good organisation of the Local Authority has been described by the e-learning manager as a factor for success. Being a member of a cluster of schools that all develop the same learning platform is comforting, as there is sharing of knowledge, ideas and support within the network. In addition, the e-learning manager benefits in her role in the school from other links with a focus on e-learning.

The learning platform was an easily customisable system that enabled the school to develop it according to the school vision. Providing ownership for staff and learners and developing a system that is inclusive was an important aspect of the implementation that allowed everyone to share the vision and contribute to the development of aspects of the learning platform.

Also, providing access for all staff and learners both at school and at home and having the infrastructure and appropriate software to do this, are conditions of success.

Hands-on support, training for less confident staff, time and refreshers given during staff meetings were crucial in enabling all staff to support the implementation process. Making learning for staff look easy, everyone starting from scratch at the same time and learning with everybody else, step by step, resulted in staff achieving a lot without realising it:

“Yes, it was a really easy process and by the end of the year you didn't realise how much you'd learnt how to do, it was really straightforward. I know some people think, other schools, when you speak to them that aren't as far ahead with their learning platform can be quite intimidated. But it's really nothing to worry about if it's dealt with in the right way, if it's done step by step and in stages.” [Teacher]

“We're in our fourth year now and it's been constant, non-stop drip, drip, drip. So, it's not one thing that you can achieve by doing an occasional staff meetings, it has got to come from every member of staff at every staff meeting. And that's where we've got to.” [E-learning manager]

The school also cultivated a culture where staff could try new things, without imposing any consequences. There was no embarrassment if they did something wrong, and at the same time, staff members are described by the leadership team as open to new things, motivated and willing to take risks and to put efforts into improving teaching and learning.

Support by a technician visiting the school twice a week has been important. Teachers are in general ICT competent and they seek help from the technician for generally more complex things. The e-learning manager receives training from the technician too. Having the same file sharing for all was also important in the implementation.

A lot of the school success in developing the learning platform is given to good leadership, but also to the approach taken by the e-learning leadership, providing a clear perspective on what is to be achieved, sharing the vision, being very organised and planning for small achievable steps that are integrated in everyday practices. Implementation has been a continuous process, building on previous steps, and having benchmarks that acted as pivotal points in the building of confidence for staff in a context where e-learning embedded in all areas of school development was important for success.

7. Lessons learnt and future plans

Staff suggest that they are satisfied with the learning platform their school has and do not see any reason to suggest a different one. The learning platform interface is manageable.

One of the next steps of the development of the learning platform is following up on the Becta parental engagement initiative. The e-learning manager and the leadership team are working on developing the Parents' portal, but before they launch it, they want to make sure that the right procedures are in place for safeguarding it.

"We need to make sure that it's done in the right way ... that the system is not abused. So I want to make sure that it's set up correctly... We just want to make sure that all the procedures are in place, some policies are in place, that a solid group of parents are using it to model how to use it correctly, so to speak. Because there's a lot of hard work that goes into it, and the last thing we'd want to cause ... any trouble." [E-learning manager]

One of the aspects that will be included in the Parents' portal is real-time reporting. The vision for the Parents' portal includes creating forums for parents, parental viewpoints, sharing curriculum booklets/documents with parents, and providing links between the curriculum and videos/podcasts on, for example, literacy with phonics.

Another plan is to enable parents and their children to learn together, and staff suggested the development of an adult learning site (for maths and literacy) that would address adults beyond the parents and carers of the school learners. One teacher described how she would find it useful when parents can give feedback and comments on learners' work on the learning platform.

In terms of providing support to learners and families, the SEN leader would like to see video conferencing between school and homes as an option on the learning platform.

There are ideas for various projects that will be delivered through the platform and have links to the curriculum and planned activities include collaboration with international schools and the local youth club within the aim of developing community cohesion.

The school also plans to enable the Governors' community to develop their own website.