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Using new technologies to develop Student Y

Gemma Hall

The 'Y Generation' student goes home after a day at school, turns on his or her laptop, MP3 player and Mobile Bluetooth and simultaneously accesses Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, MSN, Wikipedia and the plethora of other applications that the 'Generation X' teachers are yet to hear of. Student Y lives in a fast-paced, digital, Web 2.0 world where information and communication are available at their fingertips and school is, in fact, slow in comparison. At Skipton Girls' High School we have been tapping into this Student Y lifestyle to enhance the learning of pupils and to extend our teaching. New technologies enable pupils to be engaged in new and innovative ways – ways in which they choose to access the world in their daily lives. Two such innovative ways are cited here: a new technological form of peer assessment and e-mentoring.

One way in which the school has used new technology innovatively is through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and its 'workshop' facility, which allows for practical and manageable engagement with the key principles behind Assessment for Learning (AfL).

One such example is with a Year 8 class (aged 12 – 13) who had just completed their study of *Romeo and Juliet*. The assessment was a reading task, whereby the pupils typed their response to a theme-based question directly into the workshop on the VLE, rather than completing the task by hand. The assessment criteria were explicitly discussed with the pupils prior to the assessment in 'student-friendly' terms, enabling them from the outset to engage with the assessment's requirements.

After completing the assessment, the pupils were asked to assess their own work, and anonymously peer assess five fellow pupils' work. The VLE software automatically allocates work to peer assessors, and ensures that all work remains anonymous, giving the assessors ample opportunity to be honest and provide constructive criticism securely. The assessment criteria took the form of a set of five predetermined, skill-based questions input by the teacher, for example: "Has the pupil used a quotation to back up every point?" The answers the assessor could choose from were on a five-point grade scale, from "Yes, very well" to "No, not at all". With each of the five criteria gradings, the pupils were invited to leave a comment for their assessee, which they all voluntarily chose to do. These comments were illuminating, in that the assessors used the terms of the assessment criteria confidently, and with deeper understanding than they do when the responses are simply marked by the teacher and handed back. The software

keeps all pupils' marks and comments 'hidden' until the teacher releases them, which means that one assessor's marks cannot be seen by another, and thus all peer marking remains impartial. This objectivity is one factor which makes the technological method much more effective than a paper-based version I have trialled. Furthermore, students' handwriting ordinarily acts as an identifier, meaning they are reluctant to leave anything but positive comments: the technology thus empowers them. The process leaves the pupils with little choice but to actively engage with the marking process, as opposed to passively receiving comments from their teacher.

The interesting thing to note about the pupils assessing themselves and their peers in such a way was that they were not at first *aware* that what they were doing constituted deep learning and leading their own learning. They at first believed that they were merely helping someone else to improve their work. However, when the students were interviewed on what they had learned through this method, it became apparent to them that through analysis of others' essays, they became much better equipped to improve their own work. Feedback then included responses such as: they felt they could now see the flaws in their own work and what they had to do to improve; they had a much better grasp of the assessment criteria and how to use each skill tested; they were able to be much more critical of their own and others' work and, in turn, to take criticism constructively; and they felt they had developed their confidence as learners.

At the end of the peer assessment, the software automatically generated a level for each pupil, based on the previous grading responses from their peers. To validate this method of assessment, I marked the assessments myself and compared the results. Astonishingly, 80% received the same grade from their class peers that I had given them, and the remaining 20% were not out of mark range by more than one level. In this case study, then, almost all pupils have evidenced they can have, and do have, the ability to assess each other's work effectively – almost as well as a teacher can – when provided with the appropriate means to do so.

The next project currently underway at Skipton Girls' High School is e-mentoring, and 'the virtual drop-in centre'. The protocol of this system mimics that of ordinary mentoring, but consists of a sixth form student (aged 16 – 18) being logged into the VLE from 4 – 5pm every evening, available to any student requiring help in the form of an instant message (IM) conversation. The mentor is able to

have unlimited real-time conversations going on at any one time. Even in its early stages, the IM chat room saw upwards of ten pupils per evening visiting the room, seeking support and advice on their work from the anonymous student mentor. Not only does this tap into young pupils' preoccupation with similar IM avenues, such as MSN and Facebook chat, but it also gives them access to quick and instant help when they are struggling. The software enables other students with the same query to access previous chat conversations, or they can, of course, seek help from the virtual mentor themselves. Notably, e-mentoring not only develops student leadership for the sixth former, but also for the younger pupils, who actively seek out help to lead their own learning. e-Mentoring so far has proved highly successful: one Year 8 pupil in the 'feedback forum' said of the experience: "The fact that it's a student [acting as e-mentor], not a teacher, makes you feel more comfortable, and they explain it in ways you can understand." Similarly, another Year 8 student has posted: "Instead of giving you the answer, [the e-mentor] tells you how to work it out, which means you're still learning" – arguably mentoring at its best.

To coincide with e-mentoring, each mentor on their designated night takes home the school mentor mobile phone, and from 4 – 9pm every night the school cohort has access to a Mentoring Text Service, where they text the phone with any homework queries and the mentor responds, also by text. This provides an instantaneous service and allows the pupils to access help and support for their own learning on a much more 24-hour basis than they could previously. If the mentor is unable to provide specific subject-related advice, she will offer advice on how to go about approaching the task, enhancing her own skills as a pragmatic learner. e-Mentoring and text mentoring enable pupils to continue their learning beyond the classroom and actively overcome any difficulties they face with their work. Furthermore, the sixth former experiences a leading facilitating role, a vital factor in augmenting her key life skills. One Year 12 e-mentor explained: "The reason why e-mentoring and text mentoring is so good is because the mentor has been in the position of the mentee recently themselves, and can remember what it's like to need the help. As an e-mentor, you feel like you're really giving something back to the school, as well as developing skills which we'll need later in life, like communication and perseverance. And we don't mind we have to do it all evening – after all, we're only jealous we didn't have the service available to us!"

As yet, e-mentoring remains popular amongst the younger students, although time will tell if the novelty factor of such support will wear off, or indeed if the chat room/texting format will soon become passé in our fast developing technological world. Its usage will no doubt soar with every new September, though, with the influx of a new Year 7 cohort (aged 11) who find comfort in the technological, anonymous support their older peers provide.

Students Y demand constant engagement with their learning in a high-paced environment that calls upon what interests them: new technologies. The teacher needs to embrace these and use them practically to extend the learning of all pupils and keep up with ever-changing developments. The examples I have given are just two of the hundreds of applications that are available to engage and motivate pupils, to enable them to feel that their learning is as fast as their wireless connection.

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