

## Booxpace at Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls

Booxpace is a virtual book club, created using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and used in the context of an 11-16 girls' secondary school.

### Tags:

Secondary, Literacy, VLE, Social Network/Forum

### Harnessing technology system outcomes:

Technology confident effective providers

Engaged and empowered learners

### Sectors:

Secondary (KS4), 14-19

### Innovation

A virtual book club was created using the Fronter VLE by Stephanie Tuey, the Learning Resources Centre (LRC) Manager at Mount Carmel RC Technology College for Girls. Booxpace was launched in April 2008 as part of the LRC's National Year of Reading campaign.

## Background

Booxpace was created to reach LRC non-users, to foster a love of reading and to improve literacy and critical skills. It was intended to reach students who don't read and students who read well. The idea behind the project was to sustain and develop the interest of more able readers whose enthusiasm would draw other, less able pupils into reading. The aim was that the really able ones could move everyone on and so broaden the reach of all readers. It was also developed to provide a 'space' for reading and discussion. Although there are areas for students to meet in the LRC, a quiet group in the space was considered a luxury. Booxpace is for all students and teachers in the school. It continues to be managed by Stephanie Tuey, the LRC Manager, and used on a daily basis throughout term time and holidays.

## Technology

Booxpace was created with Fronter, a VLE introduced into most Islington secondary schools. From Year 7, all students become club members with access to the resources. The technology is used as a communication tool, with a page for news and messages and a discussion forum. The main function is to encourage pupils to read and enter into discussion with peers and teachers. This is illustrated by an example from the forum of how debates, some of them contentious, are instigated:

*"Pupils had recommended a particular book to be stocked by the LRC (the novel 'Ugly'). Its suitability was debated between teachers and pupils – pupils were keen, some teachers were not. The ensuing discussion ran over many postings, which drew interest from a range of pupils throughout the school."*

## Teaching and learning

The technology enables pupils who might never have come to a library in person to participate in individual and group learning. Stephanie Tuey cited one of the students whom she had never met and who didn't come into the library who registered on Booxpace. The student was interested, shared things online and contributed.

The interactive nature of the technology helps pupils to develop a sense of audience, how to adopt an appropriate response style and how to become more critical readers and writers. Students have the opportunity to discover texts which they might not have considered reading. For example, Stephanie Tuey had set up a scheme to introduce pupils to the classics. As an incentive, £10 book tokens were offered to pupils who had verifiably read six classics. An online classics discussion forum has since evolved.

Ms Tuey emphasizes the reliability and consistency of the VLE, the fact that *'it is always there'*. A physical book club has drawbacks – there are comings and

goings, people forget things, but with the VLE it is *'the visible presence, the 24-7 nature of it'* that matters. Pupils can communicate with each other, with their teachers and with the LRC Manager from home, on holiday and over the summer.

## Impact

The initial impact was significant, there was an enthusiasm that generated more feedback, but over time there has been some inevitable audience loss. Keeping the momentum going with teachers has been important. The LRC Manager supports other reading initiatives by suggesting use of Boospace to advertise and disseminate information and to provide an online discussion forum. Boospace competitions, links to national competitions, student artwork, photographs and prizes help to maintain interest and momentum.

Boospace is about encouraging the students at the school to keep reading, to keep moving them on to more challenging books. Ms Tuey feels this might have even more impact if other schools could be invited to join:

*"What is unique to Boospace is that the technology enables pupils with poor literacy skills to engage in discussion in an environment where they feel included. They might not have got very far with a book but the Forum encourages them to feel part of a 'reading community' and to feel that their contribution online, even if limited, is of value. It is OK to read."*

## Challenges

There can be a gender divide. MsTuey would like to encourage students to engage more with non-fiction texts: *"Girls can have non-fiction reading deficits"*. The challenge with boys is different. Negative assumptions can be made about boys, but in fact, many boys are good readers, whose ability to be precise and to synthesize non-narrative texts is overlooked. Boys and girls should be given more non-narrative booklists.

Boys and girls do use technologies differently so there may be a case for looking at how boys might use a VLE book club. A comparison might also be made between a group of boys using Fronter book club, to see how their levels of reading could be maintained, compared with an unsupported group. Could the VLE make a motivational or some other quantifiable or qualitative difference? MsTuey believes it would be possible to set up a project using the Fronter VLE with secondary schools, *"...to select a trial group with boys using a VLE forum to share experiences about books and reading, to see how their reading developed and who kept up. This would be an interesting thing to do."* However, she also cautions: *"The VLE is just a tool, not a magic bullet"*.

There was also initial concern that a VLE, once set up, would be supported and not be vulnerable to data going missing, or arbitrary changes in infrastructure or decisions made by service providers and clients such as local authorities.

## Wider adoption

Libraries are not classrooms. They have additional roles besides those which are curriculum-related, including for contemplative activity, reflection, relaxation. Boospace has the potential to develop virtual communities of reading, with small groups springing up around themes, or authors. Seeding partnerships with other schools could be beneficial, if selectively managed. It would be good to open up an author programme, so that authors could be invited into dialogue with the LRC Manager.

The Fronter technology could be made to feel less 'clunky' and brought up to date with other competing technologies. This, however, applies to all activities which use Fronter, and not just to its wider adoption in relation to the virtual book club.