Communication comes alive with the new social media tools from FirstClass

Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School & Humanities College

"Communication is 100% better with staff being able to very easily share curriculum information with students."

Mr J Nursall,
IT Manager.
Bishop Ullathorne
Catholic School

Prior to 2008 Bishop Ullathorne Catholic School & Humanities College in Coventry was using a combination of Moodle together with a web-based email system to meet its communication and online learning needs. According to John Nursall, the school's IT Manager, user adoption of both systems was almost non-existent and there were a number of issues with the back office part of Moodle.

The school really needed a system which would provide them with a range of communications tools and also act as a VLE. Having researched a number of potential solutions, the decision was made to go with FirstClass, mainly on account of cost and ease of use. The fact that FirstClass also integrated seamlessly with their existing online reporting solution, osis**report**, was an added bonus.

Today the school has 1,200 staff and students using FirstClass with plans in place to add parents to the system soon. **Parents** will have access to their students' report and day to day attendance information as well as facilitating **home-school links**. Mr. Nursall says that "communication is 100% better with staff being able to very easily share curriculum information with students.

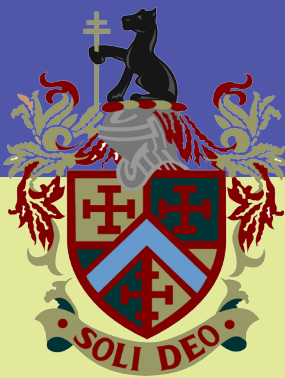There are so many different sides to FirstClass that we keep discovering more projects and areas where we can use it." For example, we are using the podcasting facilities to make school radio broadcasts, the remote access capabilities to make class materials and homework available to students with long-term sickness, the collaborative forums to deliver technical support and a staffroom discussion area.

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With the release of FirstClass 10, a variety of social networking tools were added to FirstClass. The school was eager to embrace this new Web 2.0 technology and rolled it out to staff and students during the Easter break. "The new social networking capabilities of FirstClass have been an instant hit with our user community" says Mr. Nursall. "We were quite taken aback by the speed of the uptake amongst both staff and students. They find it very easy to use and navigate. From my perspective, the biggest advantages are that it is secure and easy to manage. A user can only access the web-based communities with their FirstClass username and password and all permissions within the new communities are governed by the existing permissions within FirstClass."

Each Department has already set up its own Community where students and staff can access documents, embedded video clips, blogs and wikis that have been posted relevant to that subject area. Communities have also been set up for extracurricular clubs, e.g. Film Club. Students and staff can 'follow' a particular community, meaning they are kept up to date with everything that is happening within that community.

One such community which has proved very popular is the 'Ambassadors'. This was set up to give the students a voice when it came to helping improve teaching from the student level up. It allows the elected student ambassadors to share their views with the whole school.

"We hope that other schools will enjoy FirstClass as much as we do"

At Bishop Ullathorne, students are allowed to create and manage their own communities thereby giving them a sense of ownership and empowering them to contribute to the school community. It is interesting to note that allowing students to use Web 2.0 tools in a fully secure environment has been identified as an enabler of education.

Mr. Nursall concludes by saying that, "The new social media tools in FirstClass have opened up a whole new world and way of communicating for our school. They have really built a stronger sense of community within the school and individual departments as well as stronger links between the school and external stakeholders (parents, work-based learning partners, etc.). We look forward to exploring the mobile access options which are available, particularly for the iPhone and iPad. Social School has really built a stronger sense of community within the school and individual departments as well as stronger links between the school and external stakeholders (parents, work-based learning partners, etc.)."