

Sir William Borlase's Grammar School



Case Study

“FirstClass is a superb Learning Platform that has not only provided our school with a great set of tools for online learning; it has also revolutionised the way we communicate and share resources throughout the school. Its ease of use and flexibility combined with the ability to access everything from home has made it very popular amongst our staff and students....we really cannot recommend this product highly enough.”

Peter Holding
Headteacher
Sir William Borlase's Grammar
School

Sir William Borlase's Grammar School (SWBGS) is a co-educational school located in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, with over 100 staff and 1,200 pupils. It was recently described by the UK's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) as “a good, popular and highly regarded school in which the high standards that pupils attain are substantially helped by their positive attitudes to learning and their attentive response to good teaching.”

THE SEARCH FOR THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING LEARNING PLATFORM

Earlier this year, the school set about searching for an educational collaboration system. In the words of their IT Manager, Anu Chawla, they were “very keen that they should not have yet another system and interface for staff to have to deal with.” They were using shared drives that were open to misuse, a separate email system and a separate website for delivering curriculum material. It became apparent that what they ideally needed was a common platform or interface for all of these functions and more for their users.

They felt that the new system needed to be a part of their overall IT strategy and should take into account the objectives outlined by the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as well as internally-developed objectives.

Key DfES Objectives:

- Online personal space for all users - ePortfolio
- Online Reports and Assessments
- Online Learning Environment
- Subject-based Collaboration
- Online Sharing of Resources
- Conferencing – Online network of teachers
- Common system for the learning, teaching, assessment, research and administrative functions

Additional System Goals & Objectives:

- Extremely easy to use without loss of functionality - they wanted the system to be very user friendly so that both teachers and students would want to use it
- Reporting solution which would take information from SIMS - their MIS
- Ability to accommodate staff, pupil and parent users
- Allow for easy outreach
- Available over the Internet
- Common platform for communication, collaboration, shared resources and learning platform

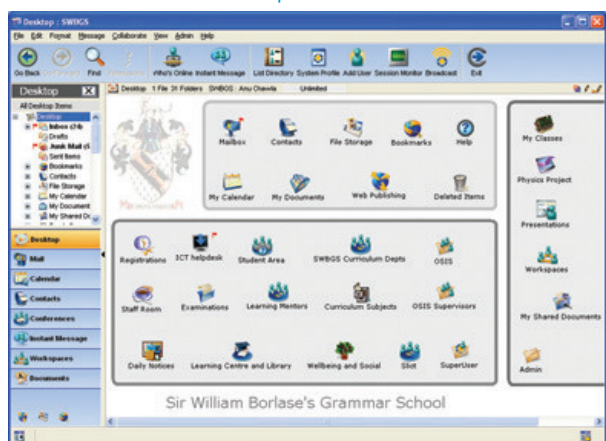
They looked at a number of systems - both commercial and open source. They carefully considered factors beyond functionality, including the ability to deploy quickly, and the need and cost of associated professional services. FirstClass together with FirstClass ED and osisREPORT was the only solution which met all of their requirements. Ms. Chawla already knew of FirstClass as a communication and collaboration platform in the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead. She was also familiar with the osisREPORT application for FirstClass. It was after looking at FirstClass ED, the new add-on eLearning module for FirstClass which follows the FirstClass philosophy of "easy to use", that she found the all encompassing Learning Platform she was looking for.

FIRSTCLASS COLLABORATION SUITE

Ms. Chawla feels that the communication and collaboration features of FirstClass have greatly improved the sense of community within the school and increased the efficiency of communication. In her words, “Both staff and students use it and, most importantly, they WANT to use it.”

Each FirstClass user has their own personalised desktop which contains their personal mailbox, calendar, personal contacts folder, file storage area, ePortfolio storage area, bookmarks, instant messaging facility and web publishing folder.

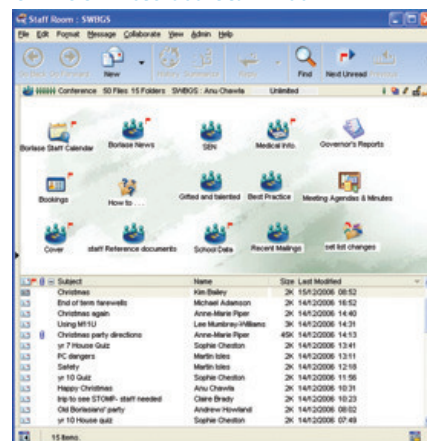
SWBGS FirstClass Desktop



In addition, users have access to a number of shared areas, including Staff Room, ICT Helpdesk, Bookings, Curriculum Subjects, Daily Notices and the Sir William Borlase's Grammar School calendar. Access to these areas is controlled via the permissions settings in FirstClass which only makes resources available to the appropriate users or user groups.

The desktop can be further personalised by adding those shared items which the user frequently accesses.

SWBGS FirstClass Staff Room



One of the advantages for education, Ms Chawla emphasizes, is the ability to provide both resources which can be shared across the whole subject/department as well as class-specific materials such as lessons and assignments.

FIRSTCLASS VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Both teachers and students have a 'My Classes' area on their FirstClass desktops. This contains all the classes relevant to the teacher or student in question. Classes are automatically created from the school's timetable information. As Ms. Chawla explained, “Some classes can be and are created manually - including special groups such as SEN or gifted and talented - but more usefully in a school, classes need to be created in bulk from timetabled classes, particularly at the beginning of the year.

The classes information is already available in osisREPORT. From that we can generate classes of students automatically. We can also associate the course content - that has already been created in a master template for that year group - to each specific class. The teacher does not need to spend time on the manipulation and setting up of the classes. Instead they can concentrate on content, such as lessons, assignments, etc.”

Each class has a navigation tree along the left hand side which is made up of a number of items common to all classes - e.g. the Board, the Class Register, Resources, Course Content, Class News, Class Inbox, Class Discussions and Class Calendar. Other items can be added by the teacher if required. To the right is a screenshot of a typical class at SWBGS – 12M/AC – an archaeology class.

When a student is assigned to a class, they automatically get the student version of the class, making all published material and resources easily available to them.

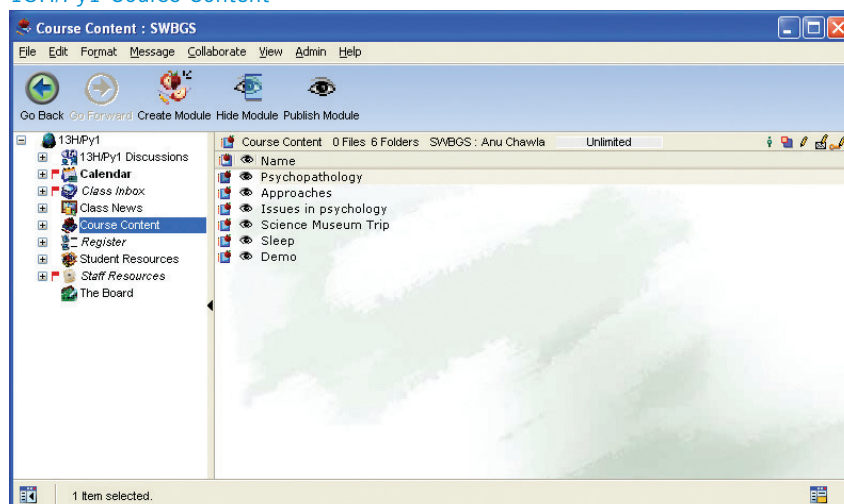
Class 12M/AC in FirstClass ED



CREATION OF COURSE CONTENT

Ms. Chawla explained that for SWBGS, “one of the most appealing features of FirstClass as a Learning Platform has been the ease and speed with which teachers can create content and assignments for their classes. There are a whole range of lesson and assignment templates already available in FirstClass which they can use. Furthermore, uploading files of any format which the teacher wants to make available to students taking the class is simply a matter of dragging and dropping. In some of the competing solutions we looked at, uploading an external file was a 12 point process! I'd imagine any more than 3 steps to upload a file would really put teachers off!”

13H/Py1 Course Content



MARKING OF ASSIGNMENTS AND GENERATION OF REPORTS

Assignments can be completed and submitted online by the student. Once submitted, all assignments for a particular class appear in the teacher's Class Inbox which is only accessible by the teacher. The teacher can then mark the assignment and offer feedback and comments. The marks for each assignment are automatically added to the student's mark book.

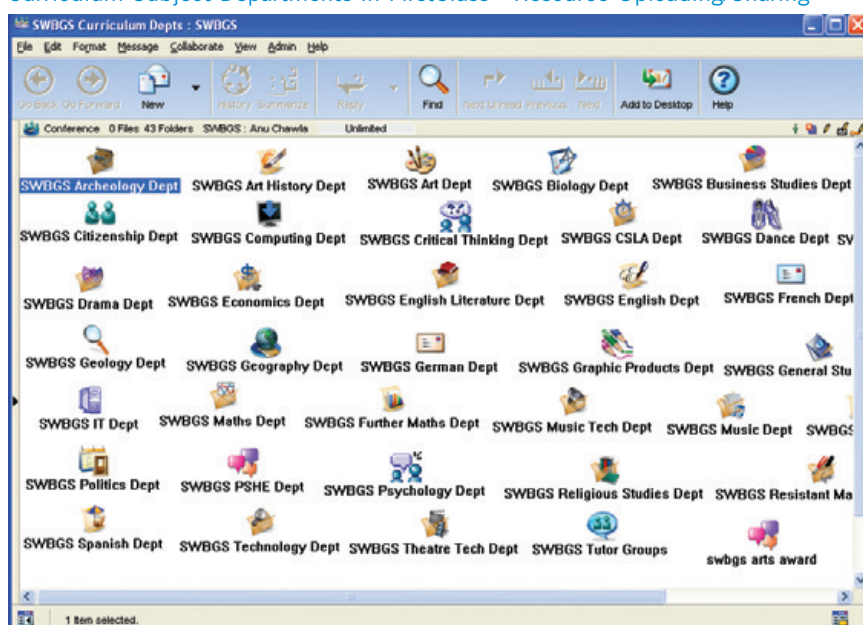
Student tracking, target setting, and formal, written reports for parents are all completed in FirstClass using osisREPORT (an integrated FirstClass application specifically designed for UK secondary schools by Semantise Ltd.). Reports are designed to match the school's reporting model and teachers can complete reports both at home and at school. Teachers have full access to the complete assessment record of each student, facilitating close monitoring of student progress and the generation of high quality reports for parents.

RE-USE OF COURSE MATERIALS

According to Ms. Chawla, course materials can be easily accessed, managed, re-used and shared with colleagues, enabling teachers at the school to spend more time teaching and less time preparing. “We do not want the teacher to have to re-create content for each class as there are a number of sets and classes. They share the content but the students are different, their timetable is different and their work is set and assessed at different times.

We have set up a structure in FirstClass that enables teachers to build a library of material that can be augmented and re-used. Right now, we are exploring ways of sharing course materials with other schools that are using FirstClass. We are quite excited as we can see the huge potential there is in working together with other neighboring schools.”

Curriculum Subject Departments in FirstClass - Resource Uploading/Sharing



BRINGING THE CLUBS ONLINE

Many non-academic areas have also been set up in FirstClass by SWBGS to support students' extra-curricular activities. This allows anyone who is registered as part of those clubs to gain access to their own designated area online. "Information can be quickly distributed to members of the various clubs regarding upcoming events, practice sessions, etc. It makes the students feel they are part of a dynamic and active online community that extends beyond the traditional confines of the curriculum," says Ms. Chawla.

SUPPORT

"We use the system 24/7," says Ms. Chawla. "We have excellent support from the FirstClass Division of Open Text. Open Text are based in Beaconsfield, which is very handy for us."

We use the system on Windows, Linux and Macs. In terms of hardware for FirstClass, we bought a server. We mirror it onto our backup server, which we already had as is good practice. The system is extremely easy to administer and control. We launched the service in September and did not go on the Server Administration course until October."

THE FUTURE

"We have approached the system deployment incrementally," stated Ms. Chawla. "The teachers have found using FirstClass very easy and so now are confident and ready to move on to the next step. In the New Year we plan to start using the many other great features which FirstClass has to offer such as podcasting, blogging, web publishing and PDA synchronisation."

In the words of the school's Headteacher, Mr. Peter Holding, "As more and more schools move towards the implementation of a Learning Platform, we feel confident that Sir William Borlase's Grammar School has the best tools available to meet all the challenges ahead."

ABOUT FIRSTCLASS

FirstClass is a cost-effective, feature-rich solution that enables education organisations to build online learning communities that connect key stakeholders within the learning cycle - including students, parents, faculty, administration, and alumni - within a secure, collaborative online environment. The FirstClass Collaboration Suite delivers a broad range of integrated applications including email, instant messaging, calendars, contact management, web publishing, blogging, podcasting, collaboration and work spaces, file sharing, file storage and archiving, and integrated voice and fax messaging. Thousands of organisations and millions of users are currently connecting and collaborating via online communities powered by FirstClass. For more information on FirstClass, please visit www.firstclass.com.

SWBGS Clubs Timetable in FirstClass

