FIRSTCLASS®
CASE STUDY

FirstClass gets teachers and students talking at John Cabot City Technology College

When it comes to Information and Communication Technology and its role in the classroom, everyone can talk theory. However Lynda McCreadie, network manager at John Cabot City Technology College does not have that luxury. With over 300 networked computers across the school, plus a significant number of remote users, she is too busy putting the theory into practice.

At the time John Cabot CTC opened in 1993, Lynda was responsible for the installation of a computer network at the school. "We were lucky enough to get our technology funding application accepted by our industry sponsors, Cable and Wireless. We received 180 Apple Macs and the infrastructure necessary to use them effectively. What I then needed was a powerful communications and collaboration system that would be suitable for a learning environment," explained Lynda. She began to research appropriate software and realized that her requirements were more demanding than she had first anticipated. "When I initially started looking at software, I wanted something robust, preferably with a successful track record in education. I was also hoping for a bit more functionality than the more basic products offered," Lynda continued.

During her search, a colleague suggested Centrinity's **FirstClass Collaborative Classroom (FirstClass CC)**. After a brief assessment, Lynda knew she had located the right product. "Simplicity was the key. I needed something that the first time users would be happy using," explained Lynda. "FirstClass offered this ease of use and I could also see a lot of potential with regards to the projects we could develop."

One of Lynda's many responsibilities involves familiarizing new staff and PGCE student teachers with the technology they will have to use during their time at the College. "Each term we have six student teachers from the University of West England and six from the University of Bath. I train them how to use the FirstClass system. Because FirstClass is so easy to use, I can usually train new users in the space of two school periods. Our students develop their use of FirstClass in no time, many of them using the excellent built-in help facilities. Because you can login into FirstClass from any computer, they can access the system from the school or from home."

Although the network was initially based on a Mac server, the school has now migrated across to a Windows NT server environment. Remote users, which include GCSE and sixth form students, as well as staff and senior administrators can connect to the John Cabot systems using TCP/IP Point-to-Point Protocol (PPP) or Apple Remote Access Protocol (ARAP). The school also has a number of laptops, which staff can use to connect from home when required. The original FirstClass software has also been upgraded and the school now uses FirstClass Collaborative Classroom Gold. Access to FirstClass is also available across the Internet using the built-in web server functions.

College Internet access is provided via the Joint Academic Network (JANet) Internet Gateway and a 2-Megabit satellite link to Bristol University. Internet access in the College is now provided to approximately 60% of desktop computers.

Lynda is proud of the technology systems that have been put in place, and the way it plays a key role in the life of the school. "Every department has its own online conferences, i.e. forums within FirstClass, where announcements are made and all the issues relating to that particular subject are discussed. We also put the morning meeting minutes into one of the staff conferences everyday, so teachers who were unable to make the 8.30am meeting don't miss out on important information and decisions," she said. "Students also have a selection of conferences at their fingertips — there are five conferences for the main school and seven for the sixth form." The online conferences in FirstClass allow teachers and students to choose a particular subject and pull down the information and emails they require as opposed to having their mailboxes overloaded with irrelevant information.

In total, Lynda now administrates approximately 50 online conferences, all with varying access rights and privileges. Of these, she is particularly pleased with the '20/20 vision conference'. "The 20/20 conference is part of a national Technology College Trust initiative, and was setup to allow sixth form students, members of staff and the principal to exchange ideas on their vision for the future role of IT in the school," she said. "On a subtler level, it has opened up channels of communication to the principal that would have been impossible in the past. Students have the opportunity to talk with the principal in an informal way."

Lynda is also proud of the developments the College is making with FirstClass. "We are now pushing forward with some exciting new functions within FirstClass. With the evolution of new tools within FirstClass, a whole new world of possibilities exist for what can be achieved within the product." The College FirstClass server is now running the Rapid Application Development environment, as well as FirstClass Application Server, which allows in-house development of customized solutions which can then be automatically rolled out to users within FirstClass without having to visit each desktop computer. "We are currently developing an on-line ICT Support Management System which is tied to an Access database on the FirstClass server and is available to all staff within the College. This allows us to track faults with equipment and provides easy feedback to our users, all from the FirstClass desktop. We hope this will allow us to provide an even higher level of service to the College."
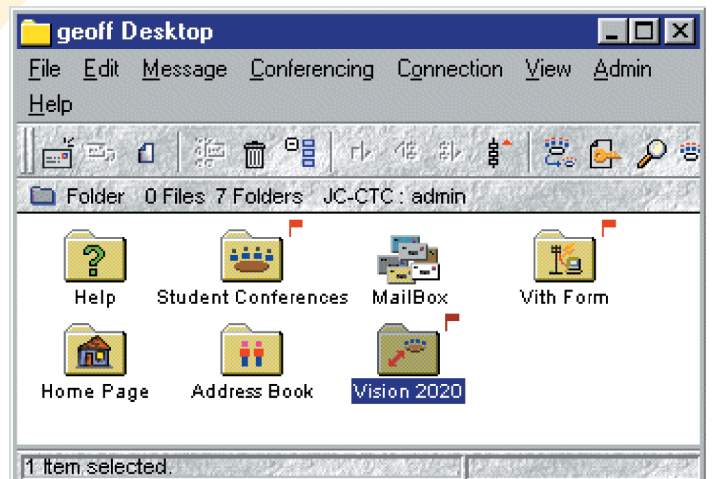
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