Education comes alive at The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead

Marshalling and distributing educational resources has become a critical issue. Finding the information that teachers, pupils, governors, inspectors and parents need is rapidly becoming a significant problem. Using Open Text's FirstClass product, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) has tackled this problem and found an easy way to communicate and share resources across its 64 schools.

RBWM caters for the education needs of some 19,000 school age children in four nursery schools, 46 primary schools, 13 secondary schools and one special needs school. Thirteen schools have nursery classes and 11 have resource units for children with special education needs.

Defining the issues

Schools are under pressure to visibly deliver results that improve year on year while maintaining tight control over spending budgets. This means getting more out of the available resources in the most effective manner. RBWM recognised that unlocking and sharing all school resources among different types of user would enhance each school's ability to maximise its resource usage. In order to further this, RBWM established the Windsor and Maidenhead Intranet for Education (WAMIE) project. The idea was to create a central infrastructure where common resources could be readily deployed to each school in a controlled manner. It was anticipated the system would need to manage upwards of 20,000 regular users.
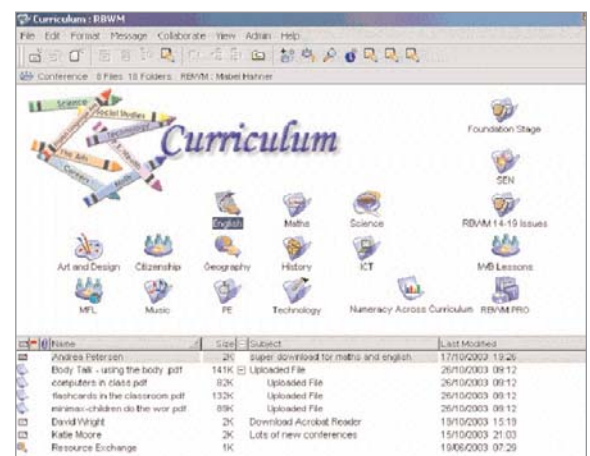
From the outset, WAMIE faced a number of obstacles. For instance, despite being centrally coordinated, schools enjoy considerable freedom in the way they establish their IT resources. This means that while many of the basic systems are common, there is significant variation in the way IT is deployed, depending on whether the school is primary, secondary or nursery. In RBWM's case, the situation is more complex because there are different hierarchies in Windsor and Maidenhead. Although RBWM has a broadband network, E-mail and I-mail were the common means of communication. These did not work well because neither method provides a collaborative or community environment in which to share resources. Mabel Hahner, Project Manager Information Strategy at RBWM, says these initial issues provided a clear indication of the kind of solution that would be required: "We needed robust scalability in a product that would make best use of our network infrastructure. That was essential and it was immediately apparent that, given the distributed nature of our user community, we required a web-based system." At a more granular level, Hahner knew that any system needed to be easy to use: "We cater for all kinds of user from age four and up and at all levels of ability. This cemented our belief that a web-based product was most likely to give us the right balance between access and usability while allowing us to develop a series of applications, each tailored to the appropriate community."

WAMIE wanted to ensure that individual schools retain the flexibility they already enjoy while reducing the amount of administration that would otherwise be necessary to create and maintain user content. "Each user community has different content needs. We organise these into what we term a 'conference.' These are web-based repositories where resources like instant messaging, discussion forums, documents, training and other information is maintained," explains Hahner.

In practice, WAMIE wants each conference to be capable of holding any resource that might form part of a community's needs. Ben Roberts, IT Network Manager at Charters School, the largest secondary school in RBWM, explains: "We want conferences for things like support and the ability to book resources like video or projectors. We also want pupils to have secure remote access to information and knowledge"

Given the variety of needs and the long list of 'must have' features, Hahner completed a detailed and extensive selection process, RBWM chose FirstClass from Open Text.
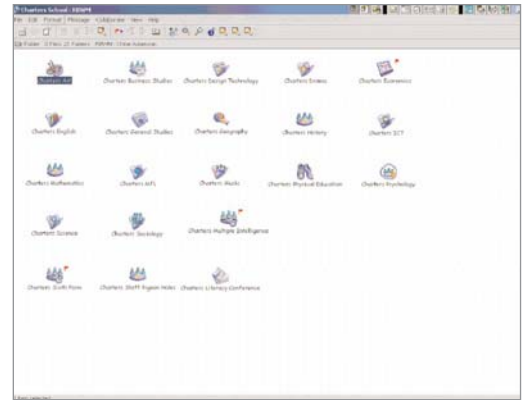

RBWM Curriculum Conference

Implementation

RBWM selected FirstClass largely because:

- Schools rated it as easy to use
- It was easy to set up and maintain communities
- FirstClass is suited to a wide range of users
- Strong recommendations from the existing user base
- It was easy to enhance and add applications without making bespoke changes
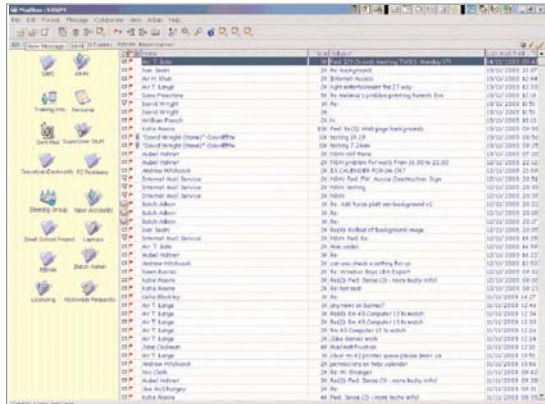
Large projects of this kind take time and it was decided to run the implementation in phases. Working closely with Semantise, a FirstClass partner, WAMIE created a working pilot where the benefits could be demonstrated in a live environment as quickly as possible. The results were:

Charters School Desktop

Pilot Phase 1 Sep-Dec 02

- Charters School pupils and all staff using FirstClass daily from both school and home
- Bisham Primary school pupils and staff using daily, plus groups of governors and parents from school and home
- Governors' resources set up and being accessed by governors across many schools
- Resources being shared among user communities

RBWM Mailbox

Pilot Phase 2 Jan-Apr 03

- l2 more senior schools setting up structure (three senior schools completed by September, 2003)
- Beacon Nursery setting up structure for collaboration with other nurseries and parents
- Techtalk being set up by school technicians as a shared support resource
- 28 schools administration and finance teams using the system daily
- All staff at 15 schools now accessing regularly
- Many cross-LEA groups using forums
- FirstClass website training delivered for 25 schools

Schools websites were added over the Spring and Summer and rollout to the remainder of the schools community continues.

Benefits

"I now see IT technicians working together because they want to share in the success - this collaboration would have been been very difficult to achieve before we started to use FirstClass in earnest.," says Hahner. WAMIE ensures that childrens' rights to privacy are protected while maintaining safe access to Internet resources. "We set up a conference on bullying. This has been a real success as it has allowed us to identify issues that might have never seen the light of day," says Roberts. The bullying conference allows children to post messages anonymously while providing the moderator a means of identifying whom is posting messages. Messages cannot be posted unless they meet certain rules that were specifically designed to protect the children. This way, Charters School is able to respond to problems very quickly while ensuring that anonymity is observed.

Roberts also reports the teaching staff have found FirstClass provides an excellent teaching resource and the uptake has been excellent: "It helps when teachers see that the system is very easy for them to use. Surprisingly perhaps, those we thought would be the most sceptical quickly became some of our most enthusiastic users," he says. This means for example that photographs and reports about school trips can be posted into teaching resources for access by the whole school.

The head teacher uses a Palm-based device, which she uses to synchronise her calendar against the FirstClass calendar. Such is the pace of adoption that Roberts has been asked to see whether FirstClass can be accessed by PDAs with GPS capability. The WAMIE project is ongoing and Hahner plans to complete communication links between Local Authority Education Finance and all schools, creating a fully networked learning community with links to overseas schools. "The only real limitation in our use of FirstClass is our imagination," says Hahner "And our ability to keep up with staff needs," adds Roberts.