Shireland's Learning Gateway

3.8 Personal Learning Networks, Eportfolios and Virtual Learning Environments

Introduction
Shireland Collegiate Academy serves children from 11-19 in three of the most deprived wards in the country. Many pupils face extreme personal pressures, with 40 percent on the Special Educational Needs Register, 10 percent from families seeking asylum or economic migrants, low parental confidence in supporting their children, and low levels of attainment on entry. With the introduction of a complete content management and e-learning platform, the Learning Gateway, the academy has been able to offer a “family portal” to improve communication between home and school, to re-engage students with personalized learning opportunities, to allow learning to happen in a number of alternative contexts including home and the community setting, and to achieve considerable success in raising levels of attainment.

Location
England

Aim
The aim is to increase personalized learning opportunities for Shireland Collegiate Academy students by supporting learning in a variety of contexts including at school, at home, and in community settings.

Rationale
Personalization has been a focus of UK government policy, and part of that focus has included closer engagement of parents in their children’s learning and education. An extensive learning platform can assist in personalizing learning and in engaging parents and the community in supporting learning.

Description
Shireland Collegiate Academy is a secondary school supporting learners aged 11-19 located in the West Midlands of England and supports a community with significant challenges.

- Shireland has 1110 students aged 11-19
- 70 percent of learners are bilingual
- 40 percent of learners are on the Special Educational Needs register
- 40 percent of learners qualify for Free School Meals
- 10 percent of learners are from families seeking asylum or are economic migrants
- Shireland serves three of the most deprived wards in England

Shireland has demonstrated considerable success in raising achievement among its learners:

- In assessment at age 16, the learners’ General Certificate of Secondary Education for 5A*-C grades has been raised from 24 percent to 64 percent
- A 6th Form for 16- to 18- year-olds has been established since 2002 with 350 students by September 2008
- Shireland is one of the highest value adding specialist schools in England

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<td>High levels of support are required for learners and their families, both educationally and socially</td>
<td>Accessing the curriculum is an issue for many of our students because of their poorly developed learning skills</td>
<td>Personalised support for literacy is our biggest issue</td>
<td>Family confidence in helping their children is low</td>
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Chart summarizing some of the context and challenges for Shireland Collegiate Academy
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Shireland’s challenges are that it serves an economically deprived, multi-faith community in which learners face significant personal pressures. These pressures include extended holidays from school to visit families abroad and children acting as care takers as well as attending school and a previously high level of pupil exclusion, from school. On entry to school, learners have low levels of confidence, competency, and attainment in English and mathematics.

Shireland, under the leadership of the Executive Principal Sir Mark Grundy, has adopted a range of measures to tackle the Academy’s challenges. Among other things, a competency-based curriculum has been introduced for some children and behavior management structure is used for training students and staffing. In addition an online learning environment, the Shireland Learning Gateway, has been developed to support learners, their families, and the staff.

The Shireland Learning Gateway is based on Microsoft Learning Gateway technology and has created a "family portal," which supports two-way communication between home and school. It allows parents to follow their children's performance and attendance, and to receive tailor-made materials to help support their children's learning. "The family has a window into school. We have a window into the home," says Sir Mark Grundy. It is a complete content management and e-learning platform which has been integrated with Management Information Software. The Gateway exists to assist the increase in personalized learning opportunities for the students, and to allow learning to happen in a wide variety of contexts: school, home, and community settings.

Shireland’s team has developed more than 800 learning units that are accessible through the Learning Gateway. The learning units are story boarded by teachers then developed by the school’s media team. In addition, the Learning Gateway provides access to real-time reports on attendance and assessments.

The Gateway can also be used to support alternative curricula. It can provide extra material in multiple languages and alternative formats for students with disabilities. The system is being used to manage primary and community languages on behalf of the Local Authority, and to help develop the English as a Second Language Service.

The overall solution has now been adopted by more than 100 further schools, and provides support to these primary and secondary schools across England.

**Scale**
Shireland Collegiate Academy has 1254 students on its roll and 150 staff. An extended network of approximately 130 schools has access to the Gateway with content which they each manage within their own setting, with maintenance and support from Shireland.

**Cost**
Figures are not available for establishment of Shireland’s Learning Gateway.

**Price**
- For smaller schools, wishing to use the software, with support, training, and maintenance included, costs are around £5000 per year
- For larger institutions, costs are between £12,000 and £15,000 a year depending on the number of staff and students

**Staffing**
Four full-time staff at Shireland support the Learning Gateway.

**Leading Practice**
- Learning platforms have been widely adopted within schools, but in few cases are they as well established and as deeply embedded in the work of the school.
- Development of roles to allow teachers to storyboard materials and the Learning Gateway team to develop them.
- The school’s support for families and parents to enable them to support their children in learning, helping to make both home and school locations for learning.
- Location of hardware with access to the Learning Gateway in community settings such as community halls, temples, mosques, and Gurdwaras thereby tackling the digital divide and perceptions of isolation and exclusion.
- Materials are based on SCORM (Sharable Content Object Reference Model—a collection of standards for web-based, e-learning materials).
- Student exercises used by learners are self-marking. Typically test results are returned to the learners within 30 seconds of completion. That rapid turnaround aids learning and the self-marking tests free teacher time, enabling the teachers to focus more of their effort on those students who require greatest support.
• Parents have unparalleled online access to their children’s work at school, including information regarding their behavior, scores, punctuality, any sanctions imposed by the school, and any rewards offered.
• Use of the Learning Gateway has demonstrated how combining aspects of supplying curriculum support, management of pupil behavior and attendance, and other quantitative data can be used effectively to improve learner engagement and success.

Impact
Use of the Learning Gateway has had a considerable impact on teaching styles. Teachers have been able to determine which pupils are struggling and in what ways more rapidly. Teachers now work in shorter cycles, in terms of planning lessons then moving on.

As a result of automated marking, pupils enjoy rapid feedback and teachers are more able to focus on supporting learners with particular needs.

Teaching working practices have also changed. In terms of use of the Learning Gateway, the peak period is Sunday afternoons, when teachers upload their plans for the week ahead. It has been noticed that teachers tend to leave the school premises one or two hours earlier than they did before the Learning Gateway was implemented, however, they often will log in to the system in the evening to review submitted homework.

While the impact is not due to the Learning Gateway alone, the success of Shireland will have been contributed to by implementation of the learning platform:
• Shireland has demonstrated considerable success in raising achievement among its learners
• In assessment at age 16, the learners’ General Certificate of Secondary Education for 5A*-C grades has been raised from 24 percent to 64 percent
• A 6th Form for 16- to 18- year-olds has been established since 2002 with 350 students by September 2008
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Lessons Learned
Shireland Collegiate Academy reports the approval of parents who feel an increased sense of involvement with their children’s learning. It’s also clear, though, that building parental engagement takes time and resources. Schools need to tidy up the data so that it’s accurate, intelligible, and accessible, and they must do more than simply announce the system to parents and then await their engagement.

Implementation of Shireland’s family portal has involved a determined process of meetings, open days, telephone surveys, development of parent “learning champions”, employment of a family engagement officer, and even a "netbus" touring the Shireland area.

Sharing data across a group of schools and colleges carries additional challenges. Technical challenges arise because when a student has individual lessons in more than one school or college, the aim should be to maintain the standard of care and access to pupil data that is normal in a single well-managed school.

Working with new technology such as Microsoft’s Deep Zoom and also Photosynth meant that Shireland has been able to create a group of technology early adopters among its teachers and students. That group has made a noticeable positive impact on teacher and learner confidence.

The importance of leadership and vision in the development of the use of technology to support learners and learning.

The information available to parents needs sensitive management, as a parent looking at sanctions and rewards may not fully understand the reasons why sanctions and rewards were applied. Over reliance on quantitative data without contextual reference may be misleading.

Technology
• Network
   School intranet, extended to wide area secure network via broadband to external sites (home access, outreach clusters)
• Hardware
   Not applicable
• Software/Applications
   Microsoft Sharepoint, as network operating system, various released and unreleased Microsoft products, such as Deep Zoom and Photosynth
• Media
  SCORM compliant materials, all media types

Similar and Related Projects
A range of learning platform implementations.

Conclusion
In his keynote speech at the BETT show (British Education and Training Technology), 2009 the UK Schools Minister, Jim Knight argued that in order to be “serious about narrowing attainment gaps, we have got to put more focus on parental engagement with their own child’s learning. And where that is happening, parents are seeing real benefits.” He also announced targets for all schools to provide a personalized learning platform for their pupils by 2010. Shireland’s Learning Gateway was presented as a benchmark and realization of this vision. As a system, it has shown that flexibility and personalization are linked, that parents and communities welcome better communication and that significant gaps between the advantaged and the disadvantaged can be overcome.

Read the Education Best Practices Whitepaper and other case studies at:

Sources
Burns, P, 2009, Telephone interview with Perry Burns, General Manager, Shireland Learning Limited

Knight, J, 2009, Presentation at the BETT show