



School uses new E-Learning tool to equip students for independent working

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Personalised learning is being taken to new heights at St John Wall Catholic School, a Specialist Humanities College in Handsworth, Birmingham, where John Hussey has been Head Teacher for three and a half years.

He explains how poor investment decisions in the past have fractured the school's ICT provision and how the school has taken positive steps to set students on their way to success.

An important part of this journey was John's discovery of Autology, a new e-learning tool that 'pushes' curriculum-rich information, in sound, film or video formats, from thousands of credible websites, 300 textbooks and a school's individual resources, to the learner's desktop as they type.

In 2005, Ofsted commended the school's 'good progress' in ICT and recommended that a higher degree of independent learning would improve attainment. Autology tailors learning to each child's needs and has received critical acclaim from schools throughout the UK. John reveals how this technology deals with issues such as tentative levels of attainment, the quality of information on the internet and e-safety. The tool also helps St John Wall's students prepare for an increasingly competitive world by developing their evaluation and analysis skills.

St John Wall School is a mixed Catholic secondary school with 630 pupils aged 11-16 on roll, 90% of whom are from areas of high social and economic deprivation, 50% on free school meals, and together speak 46 mother languages. As a designated Specialist Humanities College, the school's areas of expertise are History, English and Religious Studies. The school's ICT provision was revamped with a new ICT room over three years ago, and more recently John's mission to incorporate a higher degree of independent learning led him to Autology. He was so impressed by a demonstration of how it works that he agreed to trial it, arming each pupil with a truly personalised learning tool.

Autology has become part of St John Wall School's long-term strategy to improve attainment. John comments: "Our aim is to help pupils reach their full potential and with Autology we can give pupils access to a wealth of resources to empower them to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding." He continues to explain that by using Autology, teachers are constantly challenged to consider the level and type of questioning they use to set assignments, so pupils can explore their own route through teacher-set tasks. John comments: "Previously, when asking a class to carry out a research project on 'trench warfare', this would often result in students trawling Google for material and producing meagre answers. Now that we have Autology in place, teachers can ask pupils to 'compare and contrast' themes, knowing that they have the right resources to produce an analytical response." When pupils start to compose text, Autology identifies the central topic and starts to collect references that they can access while they are writing. The links change accordingly, following their train of thought, so no two learners will necessarily receive the same bank of reference material. Once they have found their first piece of research they can take points from this and combine it with further pieces – that way it is personalised to them.

One of John's concerns is that pupils use the web as a prime source of information even though much of the material is irrelevant to classroom study. He affirms: "Pupils can waste a lot of time and easily become distracted by the information on the web, whereas Autology keeps learners on task with materials that link directly to the syllabus." He adds: "It also eliminates the worry of pupils accessing unsuitable information or materials which have been created for US markets." As soon as the icons on the Autology toolbar light up, students know that the resources have arrived and parents can feel reassured that their child is working within a semi-walled garden, whereby the information derives from more than 300 current textbooks from major publishers such as Heinemann, Letts and Encyclopaedia Britannica plus thousands of credible websites.

Teachers at the school have begun to add their own resources. One such person is Vic Panjanaden, an NQT Humanities teacher, who conducted a trial exercise that proved Autology helped students stay on task. He asked a Year 8 group to produce a booklet on the Norman Conquest to Year 4 pupils, asking them to consider their audience and suitable presentation methods. This challenged their critical thinking skills and developed their ability to research information, appropriating it to their own project aims. Vic comments: "Autology has the potential to be instrumental in developing pupils' individual learning, specifically in the area of research. Personalised learning can be furthered by Autology's ability to allow pupils access to classwork, homework and forums based on topics learned in school in their own home as homework challenges or as study support."

To successfully implement Autology at the school, John believes it was important to get the buy-in from not just the students and teachers but also the parents. John comments: "We introduced Autology to parents when meeting to discuss the Birmingham Universal Access Scheme, which provides laptops for pupils to take home. We

not only wanted parents to see how this brilliant tool can help their child's learning but also how, through this scheme, every pupil can have equal access to it."

John concludes: "Autology is not a one size fits all solution as you have to personalise it for both teachers and pupils in order to utilise its full capabilities. We hope that one day the pupils will take the lead in developing Autology in the school by bringing their own ideas to it." In order for students in England to compete with the rest of the world they need to develop the higher order skills of evaluation and analysis and free up their imagination, which is why schools need to provide students with top quality resources through the medium they respond well to.

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