The 21st Century
Learning Alliance

Learning Journey:
Greys Education Centre

Physical centres for learning

Using e-learning to Create and Support Virtual and Physical Schools.
Greys Education Centre, Bedfordshire, is an education centre that exists both virtually and physically. It is physically based at four centres, which include a specialist hospital school and a Young Mothers' unit. The centre supports Bedfordshire's excluded learners as well as those unable to attend school due to pregnancy, long-term illness or admission to hospital. School based behaviour support and reintegration support is also available.

Greys Education Centre also offers at its core a virtual school e-learning provision. This e-learning is in its third year and gives access for all seventeen Bedfordshire Upper Schools to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Students, parents, schools and peer mentors are fully involved in a partnership approach through the e-learning access which aims to provide '24/7' access to a virtual school.

"There are few things more devastating in a child's life than to be excluded from school," says head teacher Sue Raffe. "That's why over the past few years we have worked hard to develop ways of providing high-quality access to learning wherever the student is and whenever he or she wants to learn."

Meeting the Needs of Individual Learners
The key focus for Greys Education Centre is to meet the needs of each individual. "Because we're a geographically dispersed organisation we needed to find other ways of reaching out and personalising the support for each learner," says Sue. The answer came in the form of an innovative ICT e-learning provision made possible through the Virtual Learning Environment. The e-learning provision had to be accessible not only to students but also to parents, schools, multi-agency partners and peer mentors.

The intentions of the VLE are ambitious: to provide access to all Greys Education Centre students; to re-engage disaffected Key Stage 4 pupils with learning; to reduce exclusion and increase achievement; to facilitate innovative personalised learning; to provide opportunities for peer mentoring; to creating resources for new curriculum remodelling and vocational pathways; to empower students to gain nationally recognised accreditation; reduce fixed term and permanent exclusions; and to be part of a package of SEN provision offered by schools in partnership with them. The VLE has also been driven by DCSF guidance on: Every Child Matters, 14-19 Provision and the SEN Code of Practice including Inclusive Schools.

The centre provides laptops, mobile broadband and access to e-learning provision to students who are either permanently excluded from Bedfordshire schools or at some degree or risk of exclusion. Individual personalised work is allocated to all students, who have access to learning and enrichment twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It allows them to work at their own pace and at their time of choosing. Students from across all

Mobile broadband provides virtual centres for learning

Virtual access to learning

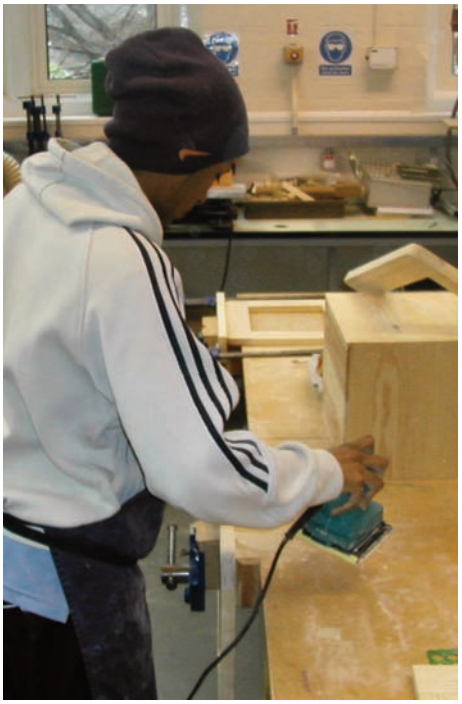
Bedfordshire upper schools can access the VLE, which is also available in Bedfordshire libraries. Within the centre's own units, students can access the VLE through well-resourced and well-maintained virtual learning zones. There are virtual classes based on GCSE subject areas, AQA unit awards, ALAN qualifications and Functional Skills. The VLE also provides student voice discussion rooms, mentoring support forums, collaborative diaries, and RSS streams. Materials also include short lessons such as Maths KS4 number work, coursework-specific lessons, as well as enrichment opportunities to develop a portfolio on an area of interest. Incidentally, these resources are shared across the county to all upper schools within Bedfordshire. The centre's specialist teachers have created almost one thousand of these materials. The VLE also enables group work through virtual sessions and discussion rooms.

Students have responded well to having an on-line learning space, tools and resources. "The VLE encourages independence and collaboration in learning. It's about empowering students," says Sue, "and with that empowerment comes responsibility." At one level, the empowerment can simply mean allowing students to personalise their own desktops to reflect their interests. At another level, it means giving students access to targeted assessment for learning (AfL) resources matched to where they are as individuals. Put these things together and the empowerment extends to e-based assessment opportunities for recognised national qualifications at any time of the year and regardless of age or key stage. Individual responsibility is developed by students building online personal portfolios and using these to showcase their work. The VLE enables students to identify tasks for learning and build portfolios that include embedded images, video or audio of research and practical work. The VLE also enables students to access learning statements, to lead e-based discussions and to evaluate their portfolios. Given the circumstances of these students, flexibility and personal responsibility for learning is an important consideration. It's not unusual now to see evidence of students working very late into the evening and at weekends. One student commented, not untypically, "Sometimes I am really bored late at night and I go on my e-learning."

Although technology is used effectively to put the individual at the centre of learning, there's also an important human dimension: peer mentoring. The centre has developed a system using people of a similar age, for example gap-year students, to provide students with peer mentors, known as Student Voice Consultants. Such peer mentoring includes face-to-face support, blogs, on-line diaries, e-mail and discussion rooms. It's proving an effective way to enthuse, to encourage, and to show students how to be independent learners.

The Importance of Partnership

An important facet of the work of Greys Education Centre is its close collaboration with a wide range of organisations: schools, colleges, parents, peer mentors, the local authority, employers, Connexions, the Learning Skills Council and many more. For example, Greys Education Centre maintains a dedicated helpline to support permanently excluded students and their parents. In another instance of partnership, the centre leads a Professional Study Group across Bedfordshire for head teachers, leadership teams and inclusion staff. But perhaps the most powerful example of this strong approach to partnership can be seen in the development of a specific objective for Greys Education Centre: to prevent potential exclusions through specifically targeted and personalised learning programmes. Working closely with schools to identify students at risk and provide appropriate support has resulted in zero permanent exclusions for these students. In the same academic year, 2006 to 2007, there was a sixty per cent reduction in fixed term exclusions too.



Physical access to learning

Next Steps

The innovative use of e-learning by Greys Education Centre in supporting teaching and learning has enabled both time and virtual space to be used flexibly. It has helped enrich students' learning experience and provide equal opportunity of access to those students unable to attend school. The impact of this work can be seen in quantitative measures that show, in 2007, eighty-four per cent of students achieved GCSE results against a county level of ninety-eight per cent. Although the cohort had six times the national and authority average of SEN pupils, forty-three per cent achieved five grades at A* to G including English and mathematics. Qualitative analysis of staff and students was positive too.

"We're pleased with what we have achieved so far," comments Sue, "but we'd like to do more and we'd like to reach more students. The next steps include enhancing our provision to offer even more accreditation pathways, strengthening our student voice by setting up a virtual e-based student council and creating a network of e-centres across the county."

For further information visit the Greys Education Centre website at **www.greys.beds.sch.uk**

The 21st Century Learning Alliance