

Brescia

House School -
Where Learning
is Always On

Case study



Brescia House School, situated in Bryanston Gauteng, is one of South Africa's leading independent girls' schools catering for 850 learners from grade 0 to matric (grade 12). Brescia House School has implemented a number of initiatives to provide learners with access to technology as part of their well-rounded and balanced education. Teachers are encouraged to use technology – including the AlwaysOn-Learning Solution that utilizes Microsoft Office 365 - to streamline administration; to communicate with colleagues, learners and parents; and above all to provide opportunities for creating engaging learning experiences that are enhanced by technology.

Introduction

In an attempt to keep abreast of technology trends in education, in 2010 Brescia House School embarked upon a project to equip every grade 10 girl with a netbook. Having this technology in the hands of every learner in a grade meant that teachers could assign work requiring the use of technology, learners could become comfortable using computers and theoretically activities using the internet and social media were possible. Whilst the learners who were part of this project (who are now in their final year of high school) are still making use of their netbooks, the technology was not being used to its full potential and in some classes the netbooks were barely touched.

The school's ICT Coordinator Lyneth Crighton says: "If you came to our school three years ago I would have had to have made a special effort to make sure that someone was using the computers on the day of your visit". Three years later a casual stroll down the corridors of Brescia reveals laptops open in almost every classroom, interactive whiteboards on in most venues and even learners whose teachers are absent are sitting quietly in front of their computers busy with work. In this case study the role of the AlwaysOn-Learning Solution utilizing Microsoft Office 365 is explored to determine its contribution to meaningful anywhere, anytime learning.

Whilst it takes some time for teachers to get comfortable with using technology, having hardware and software that are user-friendly, easy to learn and intuitive helps to ensure that the investment in technology pays off. Brescia House School's ICT Coordinator explored a number of different hardware and software options to find solutions that would be easy for teachers to use without taking away teaching time to perform administrative tasks. The school sought a solution that would be appropriate for the age of the learners whilst still familiarising them with the technology they will encounter in the workplace. Brescia House School also looked for a solution that would allow parents to see what their children are doing at school – whilst still being affordable. Crighton says: "The computer lab was a one-size-fits-all approach and we did not want a one-size-fits-all solution. We need to put our teachers and learners first. What we are striving to do is anywhere, anytime learning. I was looking for different ways to achieve that."

Situation

The AlwaysOn-Learning Solution has been implemented at Brescia House to provide a portal for sharing resources, completing administrative tasks and encouraging communication and collaboration within classes. This was easily achieved as the solution is built using Office 365 and most of the learners have Dell laptops preloaded with Microsoft Office software. The solution also has a strong mobile component that is supported in conjunction with Nokia. Being able to access a variety of tools and resources via a single portal has helped to ensure that technology is being used for sound educational purposes without creating more work for the teacher.

At Brescia they had tried another learning management system prior to implementing the Always-On-Learning Solution but few teachers made good use of this system as the majority of teachers found it difficult to master. Most Brescia teachers are comfortable with using Microsoft technologies, so it was thought that a learning management solution that made use of familiar Microsoft software would be easier for teachers to master and implement. A further advantage of the AlwaysOn-Learning Solution was that the terminology could be customised to use language commonly used at Brescia instead of talking about modules and units but rather subjects and classes.

In the past, some teachers made use of Facebook in their lessons but whilst this social networking platform was easy to use it was out of the school's control, younger learners could not legally make use of it and there were concerns about online safety. As part of the AlwaysOn-Learning solution, learners have been able to use social media to blog, tweet and chat with one another as part of a learning activity – but this takes place in a controlled environment on SharePoint Online. This makes it easy for teachers to monitor what is being written and to control who has access to the discussions taking place. If invited, parents can see what their children are up to on the platform, or a teacher can share the contents of a class discussion on the school blog or keep class interaction private depending on what is appropriate in each situation. These features can be accessed from any device with an internet browser and but key applications within Dell and Nokia Lumina devices as well as Windows 8 based tablets or Windows 8 based phones make interaction easy to achieve.

In 2009 the school realised that each learner needed an email address and these were assigned using a free web-based email application. The email addresses streamlined communication and gave each email a Brescia House School identity, but with so many email addresses to administer, the IT department continually had to reset passwords when these were forgotten and learners could not make use of all the Outlook functionality. In 2010 the school adopted Live@Edu as an email solution which allowed learners to reset their passwords themselves. Other advantages included the fact that when learners left the school it was possible for them to easily be

removed from Exchange Online, but whilst they were at school their mail could be monitored and subject to the school's acceptable use policy.

At Brescia House School it will be easy to move the Live@Edu addresses over to the upgraded Office 365 solution and to provide access to additional tools and features to teachers and learners. Learners will now also have access to SharePoint Online – a collaboration tool that allows teachers to store documents, host blogs, microsites and wikis and learners will have the ability to collaborate on documents at the same time. With Lync Online (which is included as part of Office 365) learners will be able to have instant message, voice and video conversations similar to using Skype and teachers will be able to present PowerPoint online. When learners leave the school they will no longer have access to the SharePoint, but they can have access to a mailbox for life through Office 365 Alumni so they don't have to worry about no longer having access to their contacts or being unable to retrieve emails sent to them.

Crighton says: "one of the big advantages of using the AlwaysOn-Learning solution is that through Microsoft Office 365 each learner has access to 7GBs of storage space in her personal SkyDrive without having to jump through a whole lot of hoops to get more than the 2GBs of free space that other cloud storage solutions offer. Another advantage of the solution is that learners will still be able to access the content that they stored on their personal SkyDrives once they leave school." The large amount of storage space in SkyDrive works well for teenagers who have large collections of photos, music and documents and want these all sorted in one place without using a photo-sharing website for photos and collecting their music somewhere else.

Solutions

At Brescia there is adequate high-speed bandwidth in every classroom to make the AlwaysOn-Learning solution work, but not every learner has internet access at home. To overcome this challenge, learners can save documents in SkyDrive so that they can view them and make changes offline, syncing their changes the next time they are online. Learners are also creative about accessing free public connectivity and have been known to access the AlwaysOn-Learning portal and their SkyDrives from gyms, fast-food restaurants and coffee shops that provide free internet access. In previous years if you left your books at school over a weekend and had a test on Monday there was little that could be done. Now learners have many ways to make a plan to get online and access their learning materials including the Siyavula text books that come for free as part of the solution.

Whilst the AlwaysOn-Learning and Office 365 key elements are available standard within Nokia Windows 8 devices, being able to access the AlwaysOn-Learning solution from any Internet enabled device is a key factor in promoting anywhere, anytime learning. Whilst most learners at Brescia have a Dell laptop and many are considering a Nokia Lumina smartphone the AlwaysOn-Learning solution and Office 365 could potentially be used in a Bring-Your-Own-Device learning environment and some Brescia girls use the solution on various devices including iPad's and Android tablets. Being accessible through any browser also means that if parents are invited to look at a class page on the Always On portal or work their child has done they would be able to do this from any type of internet enabled device including a smartphone.

The solution has enabled Brescia to consider totally moving to a cloud based platform which would involve paying a monthly license fee for the software. Brescia House's ICT Coordinator Lyneth Crighton notes "technology evolves all the time – and subscription based licensing is starting to be more accepted in South Africa". Licensing software in this way would mean that parents would be able to spend less initially on getting their children equipped and as new versions of software become available they could easily upgrade as opposed to continuing to use software that was paid for outright. Learners who have chosen not to get a Dell laptop pre-loaded with Microsoft software can still make use of the solution which makes it possible for them to still complete any tasks that are assigned requiring access to Microsoft Office meaning that lack of access to software is not a factor that will prevent any learner from completing an assignment or participating in a class project.

Benefits

The benefits of the AlwaysOn-Learning solution are best demonstrated by looking at the teacher who volunteered to trial the platform in her classroom. Erica Makings who teaches Natural and Life Sciences at Brescia House School holds a doctoral degree in Biochemistry but is fairly new to the practice of integrating technology into her lessons. Prior to arriving at the school, just over a year ago, Makings came from a school where the only technology in her classroom was an over-head projector that she had hired herself. She admits that at first it was intimidating to teach at a school with as much access to technology as there is at Brescia House School. Makings recalls her first day when "I walked into a class where every learner had a laptop. I didn't know how to turn on the interactive whiteboard. I lost documents." Undeterred by her lack of advanced computer skills, Makings was determined to learn how to use the AlwaysOn-Learning Solution and to implement it in her class. She says that contributing to the Siyavula open educational resources had allowed her to see first-hand the power of developing and sharing learning materials and she was eager to use a platform that would allow for easy sharing and collaboration in her classroom.

Makings put her research background to use and approached learning how to make the most of the technology scientifically. Before implementing the solution with the whole class Makings asked a group of five girls to volunteer to help her to trial the AlwaysOn-Learning solution. Makings looked for girls who would be able to showcase the solution to other learners and teachers; who would participate using the various tools available; and who would be able to speak candidly about what was and was not working so that they could find solutions and develop best practices. With some training from DAC Systems, and some support from the ICT coordinator, Makings and her team found it easy to navigate through the solution and to figure out how to use the various features.

One of the girls who participated in the AlwaysOn-Learning trial was grade nine learner, Kirsty Everett. Everett claims that what she likes about the AlwaysOn-Learning solution is that the platform provides convenience and that the information and tools that she needs are at her fingertips. "You can have your textbook open – and other documents open on the screen at the same time. If I want to draw a table I can do it without having to dig in my bag for a ruler", says Everett. Having access to notes and some textbooks in digital form reduces the weight of school bags and learners who want to look over their work at home or on holiday can access their learning materials without having their school bags with them. Everett claims that whilst some teachers still expect homework or class assignments to be printed and handed in it is much easier to submit work electronically and in classes where this happens it is easy for the teacher to track whose work was submitted on time.

Customer:
Brescia House

Country of origin:
South Africa

Website:
www.brescia.co.za

Industry:
Education

Software and Services
AlwaysOn-Learning solution based on
Microsoft Office 365

Vertical Industries
Education

IT Solution
Implementing the AlwaysOn-Learning
solution
Using Office 365

Partners
Dac Systems
Support from Dell South Africa and
Nokia South Africa