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Well connected

Sophie Beyer speaks to Bryanston School pupils and staff to see how the best connectivity can bring learning benefits

Posted by Hannah Vickers | April 14, 2017 | Secondary

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Every school is different, yet each seeks the best educational outcomes for their pupils. Deep in the Dorset countryside, Bryanston School is one of a kind – an independent boarding school with 600 pupils and 300 staff.

Bryanston has sought technology suited to its own aims and ethos, some of the edtech software has been tailored specifically for the school's needs but much of the technology has relevance for the wider school sector.

Tech is integral but unobtrusive.

The students register throughout the day at the canteen, for pupils who don't like using their fingerprint, there is also face recognition registration. The campus consists of 30 buildings, as the pupils walk around the site they are always linked to their learning through the blanket coverage Wi-Fi.

Future proofing has been designed in; all new builds have discreet space for cabling for possible technological changes. Next year, the redeveloped sports hall will be able to hold all the students having examinations, and the area has been designed to enable online exams when they become standard.

This commitment to innovation applies to the technological architecture too.

The campus is covered by over 400 Aruba 802.11 wireless access points managed by two Mobility Controllers, which enable the technologically connected learning. The primary line is 1GBPS, with a secondary of 100MBPS – very fast for the location.

The school is phasing out paper and bringing in Boardingware, software to help determine where the children are, as Bryanston has to safeguard its boarders around the clock. Bryanston pupils log activity on stationary tablets around the school, which connects to an app on the teachers' smartphones. This allows staff to know who is on and off site, and to analyse how the pupils are spending their time to help inform good practice, which can form the basis of the pupil/tutor discussion.



The fundamental ethos of the school is based on the Dalton Plan, which has evolved considerably since first formulated a century ago, but is essentially based on creating conditions which enable the learner to learn. The edtech at Bryanston reflects this, and is designed to empower learning. Bryanston's facilities and IT budget is substantial, and although clearly out of the reach of many schools due to increasing funding constraints, are there elements of Bryanston's edtech that could be adopted more widely?

Andy Barnes, Director of IT at Bryanston, has chosen to trial some exciting technology in the school. He is very definite that the tech is subservient to education, and not the other way around. What the tech doesn't do is determine what happens where, he says: "It is just here to provide a platform to work from. It's about the best possible education, back to the proper relationship between teacher and pupil, and fuelling that [relationship]."

Andy says the benefits of tech are hard to quantify. However, the advantages of being in a school which is so well connected are clear when walking through the large campus between houses, departments and classrooms. Students stay linked to the learning

portals as they travel around, as they don't have to keep logging in and out of their applications. This puts the student in control of their learning on their own computer, which has instant feedback from teachers.

This real-time information and tracking is accessible to pupils, staff and parents on the custom-made Bryanston eChart. The eChart displays assignment results, if something is late, and tracks pupil performance over time. Staff use the eChart as a starting point for one-to-one tutorials, to check understanding on a topic, explore an issue in more detail, recognise good performance and identify issues swiftly. Both grades and teacher suggestions and feedback are displayed. Andy says that the pupils make decisions and change behaviours off the back of the eChart, and this can spark debate. He adds: "The commentary is as important as getting the grade, about taking the pupil from where they are, to where they need to be."

The school operates a flexible BYOD approach. Some teachers, such as Andy, allow children to use their mobiles and laptops in class. The learning portal eLockers is on the students' devices, and this allows access to relevant resources dependent on physical location. It works as a drop folder where teachers and pupils can upload resources such as videos and PowerPoints, and students can upload assignments and receive group feedback.



Andy is piloting additional technology that could enhance the functionality of the eLocker portal, and improve the technological connectivity of the school. Aruba beacons and the Aruba Meridian platform, used in the IT department and library at present, are more often used in hospitals, stadia and vast conference centres. Aruba beacons pin resources to a physical location. When pupils and their devices move close to the beacons, they become able to download resources specifically for that location, specifically for them, which can be tailored directly to their needs.

One of the biggest challenges of most teachers is diversity of learning, and tech facilitates appealing to different styles of learning. "The technology solves the problem of [the teacher] being the single repository, the single channel to success. What the tech does is even that out really well... We are trying to allow people to experiment with different learning technologies and techniques," says Andy.

The Aruba beacons could trigger resources for dyslexia or a standard assignment. It's all about the identity of the learner. In the future Bryanston will be considering technologies that are even further ahead of the curve as part of their technology strategy.

How do the pupils feel about all this tracking? The pupils seem to approve of mixing the old with the new. Molly and Toby, both 16, were relaxed about the use of technology. For Molly, the main benefits were saving time, and she liked the mix of traditional paper-based learning and tech, and both checked their eCharts daily.

The pupils both emphasised that use of tech and the eChart allowed them to make better choices about how and where they spend their time. Toby said he didn't have a problem disconnecting, and in fact he had left his mobile in his dorm as he was going to play sports later. Molly didn't have a problem disconnecting from schoolwork, and if pupils do have problems disconnecting

from their gadgets, at the end of the day staff use a more old fashioned method – they pull the plug. Pupils’ access to Wi-Fi is restricted depending on age with Aruba ClearPass Policy Manager.

Bryanston’s motto, et nova et vetera (the new and the old), reflects the school team’s commitment to innovation. Tech has been chosen and designed to better connect pupil, tutor and learning for the best educational outcomes.

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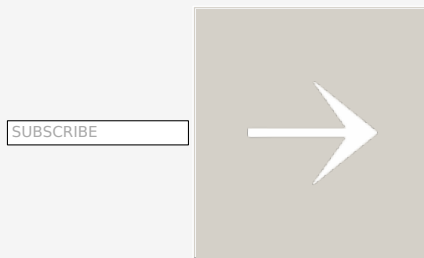
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