



# Saint Stephen's College mastering the blend

The school's adoption of a blended learning model hasn't come easily, **ET Staff**

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**T**hey say good things come to those who wait and that's proved true at Saint Stephen's College on the Gold Coast as the school moves toward a blended classroom model.

When you think about it enough, the enormity of the task faced by the school becomes apparent, daunting even. The intention wasn't just to introduce technology but to realise a paradigmatic shift in the way teaching worked at the school; it wasn't so much about the fashionable flipped learning idea as much as changing attitudes, psychology and the hundred years of teaching that had come before.

The transition at Saint Stephen's has taken seven years so far and Peter West the Director of e-Learning at the school says they're not there yet, but it's coming along well.

"I hate reading articles about getting laptops out of classrooms as they are a distraction, if you don't integrate technology in a meaningful way of course it becomes a distraction. You can't just throw a laptop into a classroom, continue to teach in the same way and expect things to change," West says.

But having jumped in with both feet, the indicators of a shift have started to appear, the students are logging on in numbers, even on the weekends, the way teachers and students are talking to each other is changing and there's evidence of students accessing material and driving their own education, answering their own questions.

"We had a case of a student who contacted a teacher outside school hours with some questions. It wasn't possible for the teacher to devote any one on one time so she was directed to some online resources which would help her, she arrived at school the next day having answered most of her questions herself and only had a few for the teacher."

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The paradigm shift needed to be supported by good technology and that process started with setting up a robust network – maintaining and optimising it is an ongoing process. The Brightspace learning environment product from D2L has been at the centre of pulling blended learning together at Saint Stephen's.

"About five years ago we began looking for a system that would continue to grow with us into the future and Brightspace was the best. It is at the core of bringing every part of the program together.

"We use a lot of online resources like **Yourtutor.com** and **Linda.com** and where possible we have single sign on so students don't have to remember usernames or a password, it's just click on a link in the system and it takes them there. We try to get the technology out of the way to make the learning and teaching front and centre. Our core business is teaching and learning, it's not technology," Mr West says.

The school put in a huge amount of work creating online resources for Years 7 to 12, the quality of those resources has been pivotal to students' adoption of the new learning model.

"When we started, teachers were saying that the kids weren't using the online learning environment. It's like ebay, if there were three products on it would you use it? No. So we had to create material that the students found valuable.

"We established a style guide for the layout and appearance of the material so it looked cohesive and the students could learn to use it easily.



I developed the style guide based on research into large companies overseas. It was pivotal, you have no idea how much time people can dedicate to choosing the font, its size, colours, instead of spending time on the content.”

Teachers were given two years to make online material without anything being expected of them other than familiarising themselves with the creation and refinement of online resources.

“We decided to go for whole institution change. I used to follow the adage that if you get the people who are interested fired up and empower them the rest will come along, well I’ve found it doesn’t always happen like that, you’ll get some people to come along but others who are quite content to watch and continue on.

“We need technology to enhance and drive education into areas where it doesn’t really work well now. We’re not saying that the classroom doesn’t work, relationships with kids are very important, providing them with a good teacher is very important but we want to enhance that using technology.

“We said that every course will be hosted online and every department will have some sort of responsibility to make that happen. Did everyone come along completely? No, but most did. Are they coming along now? Yes.”

A lot of myths have been buried along the way, including the trope about young teachers

Peter West Director of e-Learning



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being keener on the technology than older members of staff.

“I’ve seen young teachers being reluctant to change while older teachers have told me that

this has reinvigorated their teaching and their enthusiasm for the job.”

“There are others who say ‘this is going to put me out of work’, to that I say no this is going to allow you to get to the richer, deeper individualised problems rather than just taking a shotgun approach, it will allow you to burrow down into each child’s needs, it doesn’t happen all the time but it increases the potential of that happening. By burrowing down into each student’s understanding you access much richer learning discussions and you make learning more personal.”

Mr West is hesitant to say that the technology has increased student performance but it certainly hasn’t affected it negatively.

“According to the *Courier Mail’s* league tables of Year 12 results Saint Stephen’s is a top 20 school in Queensland, can I say that going down this path has improved results? Well no, I haven’t got that data yet. Can we say that it hasn’t made things worse? You bet.

“We’ve been doing things a certain way for 100 years now and change isn’t going to come overnight, we’ve got to change teachers and their approach we’ve also got to change students, because sometimes they actually quite like sitting in a traditional class so they can sit and float, they can get spoon fed. When you start to flip it around, some love it and some say ‘well can’t you just tell me everything?’ We have a way to go yet,” West says. **ET**