

To extend the learning opportunities for pupils at Taunton School **Andy Kemp**, director of digital strategy, trawled the VLE market to find the best solution for his school. Here he shares his research findings on the leading competitors.



# The VLE evaluation

**T**he VLE market is dominated by a number of products, some of which are complimentary and others which are aimed at different markets. When Taunton School needed a VLE solution, the first thing we did was to identify the main players, and then whittle down the choice by filtering the various solutions through our school requirements criteria.

The products we looked at included: Moodle, Frog, LP+, SLG, Blackboard, Fronter, StudyWiz, SharePoint, Firefly and Uniservity.

One criterion we felt was essential for our needs was having the physical server on site, as whilst things have certainly improved, Internet connections are not always reliable. This eliminated from our search immediately Uniservity and Fronter as neither of these have the option for hosting on site. Blackboard was also eliminated due to its costs being very high and being primarily aimed at the HE market.

This left us considering Moodle, Frog, LP+, StudyWiz, Firefly, SLG and SharePoint.

## LP+

LP+ is a very capable package (built on top of SharePoint), but from my perspective seemed very complicated to build a simple page with multimedia content, which I was concerned would limit its use to only the most technical – that said if you had a more technical staff you may find it more appealing. For this reason and the lack of in-school hosting we decided not to pursue LP+ any further.

We were hoping through this project to achieve both a typical VLE and a more efficient means of reporting to parents.

## SLG

Only Frog offer a parental portal as part of the same solution, so we also considered SLG (SIMs Learning Gateway) as a mechanism for extracting and reporting data from SIMs and making it available to parents.

SLG is fundamentally a collection of webparts for SharePoint which enable the extraction of data from SIMs in real time, and then displays them within a SharePoint installation. This meant that one of the possible solutions we considered was having a SharePoint portal which would act as a front end for any VLE solution. Web parts are also available for Moodle & StudyWiz (at an annual cost).

This solution would certainly offer a very powerful and (technically) flexible solution. However my experience of using SharePoint led me to believe that going down this route would add extra complication and technical difficulty to the use of the VLE. Also as we had at this time no internal experience of SharePoint this may well lead to significant extra costs to integrate solutions.

SLG can also be externally hosted by Capita, giving you a fairly vanilla SharePoint install with the webparts in. SLG for those who haven't used it does a very good job of replicating parts of SIMs on the web, which is great if you like the way SIMS displays its data.

Personally I was hoping to have a bit more freedom with how the data can be displayed and manipulated, but sadly the product is quite limited in this area. For example if you enter your interim reports in the marksheet view they are sent to parents in the same way so you get the list of reports which can be filtered by date but not by subject, so if you wanted to review your child's English grades over the past two years you would have to filter the report for the dates and the sort the column by name to see the English ones which doesn't seem very intuitive. Also there is no facility to graph the assessment data to look at trends.

In addition, whilst there are some graphs for attendance data the graphical quality of the pie charts etc seemed quite pixelated. It does have the advantage of being fully integrated into SIMS and if you already have a SharePoint installation it may well be worth giving more thought to it. It also enables you to do some data entry into SIMS, but as we had remote access to SIMS via Citrix already, this was not something that we were interested in.

Now we come down to the final four VLE products we were considering Moodle, Frog, Firefly and StudyWiz. These are quite different products in many senses and will be more appropriate to different users.

## Moodle

Moodle, which I have used at a previous school, is often touted as the 'free' solution. Whilst Moodle is certainly OpenSource, and therefore has no licensing fee, to call it free is to not see the whole picture.

It is quite possible to throw together a basic Moodle installation on a cheap bit of webspace (or an old internal server) for very little money. Where Moodle really costs though is in time.

As someone who has spent many hours writing plugins, themes and blocks for Moodle I am very aware of its cost. However if you have enthusiastic and experienced tech support/teaching staff who are willing to spend a lot of time integrating various plugins, tweaking themes and integrating third-part solutions then Moodle is truly as



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excellent solution.

As we were looking for a solution to be used across the whole age range I had my concerns about how well Moodle could be used across this whole spectrum given its origins as a FE/HE product, however I am aware there are a few pioneers pushing its use in the primary age group. My personal concern with a Moodle based solution is that it is very reliant upon technical expertise to create and maintain it, and should that technical expertise ever move on you have the potential issue of the project falling into disrepair as you don't have a direct external support contract. However if you are prepared to take this risk and have a good team then Moodle is a very flexible and powerful solution with a fast growing community of support behind it. At present I still find Moodle to be a little bit too complicated for all staff to use without significant training, but I do think this is improving...

It's worth also noting that there are a growing number of companies out there who will do the hosting and maintenance for you allowing the school to focus on the content which may alleviate some of the concerns raised above.

### StudyWiz

StudyWiz is clearly a very broad and powerful VLE product. It has a huge array of features, such as blogs, quizzes, assessments, games, forums, galleries, surveys and e-lockers – plus a good mobile interface and iPhone app.

This is a very impressive attempt at trying to explore the possibility of handheld learning (i.e. class equipped with iPod Touch devices).

ClickView integration was very impressive, and seemed very simple to use.

On the negative side I personally found creating content on StudyWiz to be quite complicated, and often counter-intuitive. For example, to create a page with links to some past-papers (something most departments would want to do), you first create an information page with some information or description on it. Then you need to go and create a folder (which must be marked as a 'Featured' folder otherwise it doesn't appear on the information page previously created). You can then set about uploading your files. The problem is that if you now want to create a different page about some other topic, then the 'featured folder' will also appear at the bottom of this page as it is 'featured' for the class not the page.

There are similar problems creating other resources: first you must create a folder, then the resource. Then you choose either to make it featured so it appears at the bottom of every page for that class or you don't, in which case students need to go through two or three more clicks to find the correct resource.

I couldn't find any obvious way of setting a resource/activity as a homework so that it would appear as something that a student 'had to do' rather than just being a resource that the student 'could do'. It may well be possible to do some of these things, but having spent a reasonable amount of time using the demo it leaves me concerned about how simple it would be for staff to use.

The reports/gradebook element of StudyWiz is very impressive but not at all simple to use. If you want to look at the results of your class then you have to go into the reports section (which can be found either in tools or on the class menu). However this is where things get complicated as there are separate reports for all the different styles of activity (eg. Multichoice, Assessment, QTIAssessment, SCORM) and then each of these have several different reports. All of these

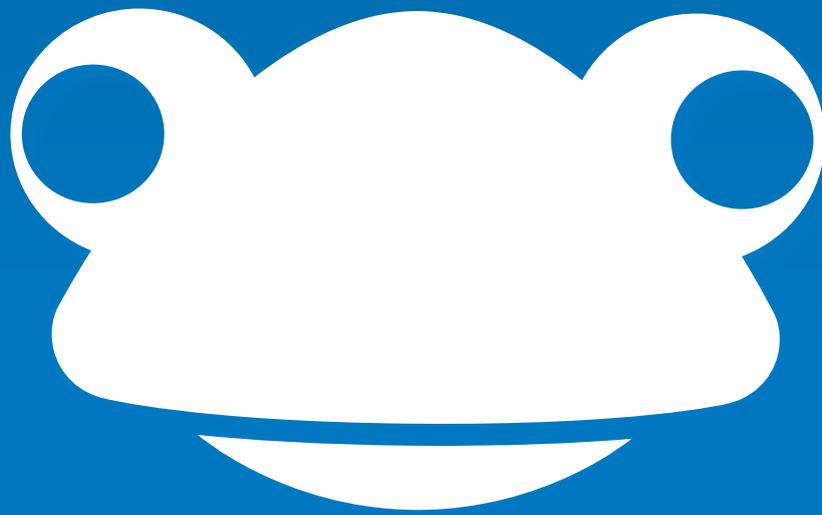
provide a huge level of detail but do so at the loss of simplicity, as I frequently had to try several different links before being able to find the correct report.

Podcasting of galleries seemed to be a nice idea with the concept that files, pictures and media would all become available in iTunes. However having done some testing on the audio/video feeds into iTunes, to see any other media it must be fed into a standard RSS feed reader.

The forums are very well done, with plenty of flexibility.

Also a related concern was the fact that StudyWiz basically resets each year and

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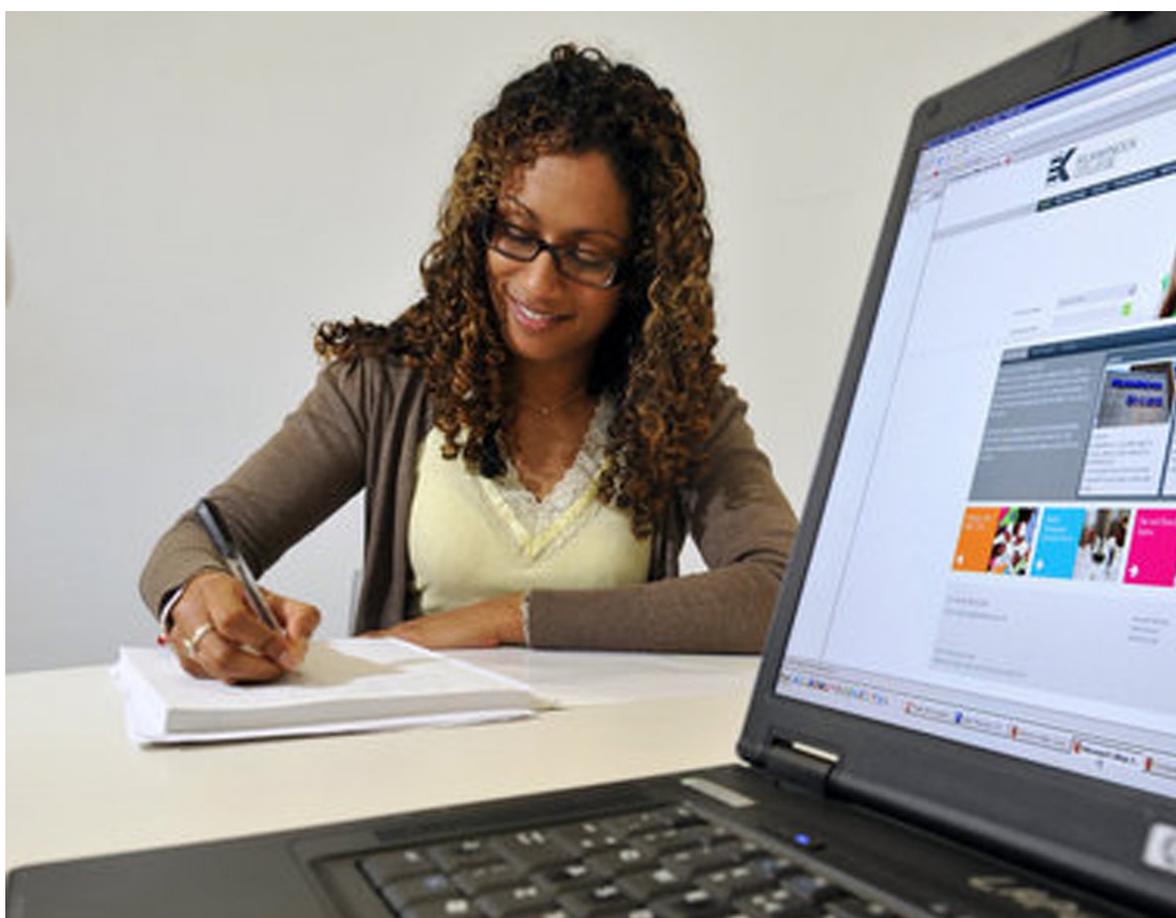
then all courses need to be put back in, and any data we wanted to carry over would again require additional intervention. I personally would prefer results and grades for students to follow them up through the school, as this gives much more scope to track progress etc.

From an aesthetical point, I find the 'secondary' theme to be quite busy and crowded. The 'primary' theme however seems much more logically structured and I could see this working better in a primary school. However the fact that we cannot 'theme' or design the layout or templates is a concern for me.

## Frog

There are several pluses and minuses to Frog as a solution, and in some cases some of the features are likely to be seen as pluses to some and minuses to others:

A single product – Frog is the only one-stop-shop solution we considered, this has potential benefits in terms of integration between the VLE elements and the Parental Reporting/Engagement elements. It also has the advantage that we should be able to roll out a complete solution in one go, although this may be seen as a disadvantage to some as you lose the modular element.



For me the crux of what I like about Frog is the simplicity mixed with flexibility. It is simple to create a page, throw up some resources, add in some media and away you go. However underneath this is a very powerful system of FrogBricks which enable the user to create various different types of resources and ideas. I personally think that Frog is the only product I have seen that would enable almost any teacher to quickly get up and running and be able to create resources without having to undertake significant INSET training.

The parental reporting side of Frog, I think, is a real strength, as it purports to offer significantly more flexibility over how SIMS data is presented than SLG does. As the data is all accessed via Capita's own Business Objects (as they are full technical partners) we should not have to worry overly about changes to table structures etc. I felt that the setup of the parental portal element of Frog had the potential to achieve more than simple reporting but more along the lines of increased dialogue between teachers and parents.

There are several other features of Frog that I felt would be useful and engaging for students. The Facebook-esque status updates in Frog 3.0 give rise to the potential for students to see Frog as the place they go regularly to keep up with friends, especially with the ability to create custom groups/events for trips and clubs etc.

One of the biggest hurdles to getting engagement with students will always be giving them a reason to visit the VLE. If the communication is all one way (i.e. we push stuff out to the students) then they are likely to lose traction as soon as there is a period where nothing is added. By also making it a controlled 'social' environment we stand a chance of students using it as a social medium as well as a learning medium which has many positive benefits.

Also the ability to embed a live website quickly and easily into another page has interesting potential for those departments who already subscribe to other web-based resources, as we could in theory just embed the page directly into Frog so pupils need never really leave the Frog environment.

The bespoke element of Frog I think is a huge benefit of their approach. I have been very impressed by the quality of the graphical design work which Frog does and feel confident that we would end up with a product that not only offers us the facilities we need but does so using a design that encourages people to use the site.

### Firefly

Firefly are a much smaller player in the VLE market but have produced a very interesting product. Built originally by a pair of school pupils for their own school, the product has grown over the last few years to now serve a number of schools up and down the country.

Like Frog, in my opinion its strength lies in its flexibility and ease of use, with the added bonus of being built on common standards and not requiring a bespoke server to run on.

Whilst not as fully featured as some of the other products considered, it offers a



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powerful range of tools, which can be picked up and used by non-technical staff to build exciting and powerful teaching and learning resources for their pupils

For me, whilst a SharePoint/SLG/StudyWiz solution would probably be a more technically advanced solution, what we gain through having a more technical solution we might lose through the intuitive and simpleness of use. As a comparison I see this as being similar to the differences between a Windows Mobile based phone and an iPhone – technically there are several things you can do on the Windows Mobile based phone that you cannot do on the iPhone. But the iPhone is so simple to use and so intuitive (my three-year-old can use mine) that users are more than happy to forgive its shortcomings and would still rather use an iPhone than the technically superior Windows Mobile based phone. And this comes from someone who happily replaced his last Windows Mobile based phone with an iPhone!

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is no magic bullet or perfect platform that will work for everyone. The key thing when undertaking a review of your VLE provision or planning your implementation is to go through, in detail, a process like the one outlined above of identifying what your primary and secondary objectives are from the project, and then exploring the full breadth of the marketplace, read all the literature, speak to the reps, but also contact other schools using the platforms and speak to the teachers as well as the technical staff! Make sure you get trials and explore them in detail...

For me the key properties I've seen in successful VLE deployments (and I've seen plenty using most of the above products) is a clear and well-articulated reason for why the school wants a VLE, and a system which is easy enough for the average member of staff to use without having to undergo significant training.

Product	Pros	Cons
<b>SLG</b>	<p>Easy access to SIMS data</p> <p>Same layout as SIMS</p> <p>Enables some limited data entry into SIMS</p> <p>Some integration with exchange data</p>	<p>Limited display options</p> <p>Limited to access only to SIMS data</p> <p>Limited ability for parents/students to manipulate data</p> <p>Quite expensive for a fairly limited scope product</p> <p>Not a VLE, but more of an add-on to a VLE</p> <p>If hosted internally requires a SharePoint/WSS Server</p>
<b>Frog</b>	<p>All-in-one package</p> <p>Seemingly forward thinking and proactive company</p> <p>Good design skills</p> <p>Very easy to use</p> <p>AD integration</p> <p>Social networking element</p> <p>Flexible parental reporting</p> <p>Hosted on site</p> <p>Relatively low on-going costs</p> <p>Good technical support – UK phone line 8:30am - 5pm five days a week</p> <p>Offers off-site access to software via Secure Gateway</p> <p>Flexible 'frogbrick' concept allows for drag and drop creation of complex pages</p>	<p>Limited online testing/quiz functions</p> <p>No integration with exchange data</p> <p>No display for Maths/Science notation – e.g. Latex etc.</p> <p>Weak forum tools</p> <p>Large initial outlay although financing is available to spread this cost</p>
<b>Uniservity</b>	<p>Very simple for end user, as most content is entered via a single rich-text box</p> <p>Growing support for more complex features</p>	<p>Graphically unexciting</p> <p>Subscription model so relatively expensive on-going costs</p> <p>Externally hosted</p> <p>Limited MIS integration</p>
<b>Moodle</b>	<p>Very flexible open-source product</p> <p>No on-going license costs</p> <p>Good choice for a 'tinkerer'</p> <p>Multiple authentication systems – AD/LDAP/POP etc</p> <p>Excellent supportive online community</p> <p>Highly extensible product that can be made to do almost anything with enough work.</p> <p>Offers SharePoint webparts</p> <p>Option to obtain hosted/maintained solutions</p>	<p>Will need some hosting either internal or external</p> <p>Will need significant technical expertise to make the most of it</p> <p>Default theme is very bland</p> <p>Aimed at secondary or older</p> <p>Setup time can be quite significant depending on what you want to achieve</p> <p>Poor SCORM implementation</p> <p>Limited MIS integration built in</p>
<b>Firefly</b>	<p>Very flexible and simple to use</p> <p>All editing is done on the page so 'What you see is what you get'</p> <p>Good integration with MIS and AD and other school systems</p> <p>Ability to build your own custom plugins</p>	<p>Lacks some of the more advanced features of other VLEs</p>

<b>StudyWiz</b>	Very good tool set – forums, wikis, quizzes, games, etc. Lots of modular options to extend the system Sharepoint Webparts available (at cost) Excellent mobile learning clients	The admin menus are not always clear and obvious No significant options to theme the site If you purchase all the options it is a large annual cost Requires Apple's WebObjects if not run on an Apple XServe – Hardware requirements
<b>Frontier</b>	Interesting design based upon the concepts of corridors and rooms Simple layout Good primary tools Good forums SIMS integration	External hosting
<b>SharePoint</b>	Well established portal software Similar look and feel to MS Office Integrates well with many third party products via webparts – e.g. SLG Exchange etc As it is a commonly used corporate package it is quite easy (if costly) to by in custom coding/support	More of a CMS than a VLE! Requires significant adaptation to use properly as a VLE Very corporate feel. SharePoint sites all look/feel the same Not very student friendly If integrated with other products run the risk of multiple tools (e.g. forums) all doing the same thing Can be expensive depending on schools current MS licensing
<b>Blackboard</b>	Very powerful and established VLE product	Mostly used by universities due to high costs

**Andy Kemp is Director of Digital Strategy at Taunton School.**

## Knowledge trails

**1) Navigating the VLEs** – The hidden costs entailed with open source VLEs can put schools and colleges off using them. Here we look at the pros and cons of both commercial and open source VLEs, how educational establishments can find the right VLE for them, as well as outlining some of the support services available.\*

<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/navigatingthe-vle-maze.htm>

**2) Top tips – Surviving in a Virtual Learning Environment** –Teachers TV's self-confessed technophobe Simon Botten navigates the (seamingly) scary world of VLEs.\*

<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/elt07-simon-botten.htm>

\* The above articles are available in e-Learning Update on the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription)

**3) Virtual Learning Environments** – As the routine use of computers becomes all pervasive, there is an expectation that VLEs will form a significant part of the next generation's experience of learning. This survey evaluates how VLEs are developing within a selection of providers.

<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/virtual-learning-environments.htm>

Article available in Leadership Briefings on the Professional Learning Environment (access by subscription)