

St Stephen's: enhanced eLearning about more than technology



Peter West with Saint Stephen's College students Alannah Hassan-Bravo, 10, Reina Boyd, 11, and Hajin Jun, 10 at Coomera on the Gold Coast. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen



STEFANIE BALOGH
NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT | Canberra | @stefaniebalogh

Equipping students with laptops or other devices simply isn't enough.

“Our core business is education, not technology,” says Peter West, the director of eLearning at Saint Stephen's College at Coomera on Queensland's Gold Coast.

Mr West has worked to transform the school into a leader in “technology-enhanced learning” by blurring the lines between offline and online learning, and ensuring students are prepared for the modern world and an evolving jobs market.

“I get so annoyed when we focus on the technology. Yes, the technology is absolutely vital but it's not the key component. It's the mindset, it's skilling teachers up to use it effectively. It's the whole-picture things, rather than just the technology,” he said.

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“It's like saying we're going to send every person in Australia a paint palette and some paint brushes and some canvases, we're going to become the artistic country,” Mr West said.

Instead, technology must be harnessed with the right know-how and environment to allow schools to focus on what really matters — learning. “We were one of the last schools in this area to go for a bring-your-own laptop program,” he said.

“We spent two years building our rich online learning environment and at least getting it up to speed so I could say to parents: ‘Look, if you’re spending the money so that all your kids can do is research stuff on the internet and type notes, we’ve just wasted your time and money.

“We want more than that, we want to have a rich learning environment with lots of support and resources so the students are actually using that as a window into a learning environment, rather than just an expensive typewriter.”

The learning environment provides an almost invisible layer of online resources which empowers teachers to teach in different ways and hands students the real-world flexibility to work to their own schedule and pace.

“I called these kids the Netflix generation,” he says. “They consume when they want to consume. The same goes for learning. They don’t learn only when they have timetabled classes.”

When Mr West checked the usage of students on Brightspace — a learning management system — on a Sunday afternoon, he found two-thirds of the Year 12 students and about half the rest of the secondary school had logged on sometime during the day.

And with the debate on handwriting, Mr West has firm views.

“Eventually we are going to get to the point where we say you need a pen with your computer because I’m a big believer that you need handwriting. All the research indicates that typewritten notes are less effective. Some people may say that if handwriting is more effective for note-taking and creative thinking, why not just stay with pen and paper. Yet the advantages of ‘digital’ paper over traditional paper are immense.”

Last year, then headmaster of Sydney Grammar School, John Vallance, said teaching was about interaction between people, and the school found “having laptops or iPads in the classroom inhibits conversation — it’s distracting”.

Mr West said he told staff at Saint Stephen’s that technology can “either be a tremendous boon to our learning or it can be the biggest distraction under the sun”.