

VIRTUAL VIRTUES

JEREMY SUTCLIFFE DISCOVERS HOW REMOTE LEARNING IS OPENING NEW PATHWAYS FOR STUDENTS...

It's the beginning of the lesson and a group of Year 10 students are looking expectantly at the screen in front of them. Facing them is their virtual tutor Matthew Peacock who, for the next hour, will be trying to challenge, coax and provoke them into an argument.

For today's lesson each of the 14 students has been asked to bring along a controversial headline from a newspaper. One produces a headline from the Sunday Telegraph: 'The Roma invasion of Paris...next stop Britain', prompting a lively debate about immigration.

The purpose of the lesson is to encourage the students to question claims and arguments and not accept them at face value. It is part of a one-year AS-level course in critical thinking offered as an enrichment activity to gifted and talented (G&T) 14 and 15 year-olds at Okehampton College, a mixed 11-18 comprehensive in Devon.

"My role is to act as Devil's advocate, to challenge students' ideas and ask them why they think or feel a certain way. The idea is to get them to look at the other side of the debate and question their thinking. I'm always trying to initiate controversy," Mr Peacock says.

What's unusual about the course is that it is delivered via broadband connection and a whiteboard using a camera that pans and tilts to allow the students to interact with their tutor who is based 200 miles away in Tonbridge, Kent.

Okehampton is one of a growing number of schools that are using video conference technology to personalise the curriculum, enabling small groups of students to take subjects they would not otherwise be able to study.

In recent years video conference learning has come into its own thanks to high-speed broadband. It is proving particularly popular in



less mainstream but academically demanding subjects – such as GCSE Latin, Mandarin, Spanish, psychology and law – where schools would otherwise be unable to provide an in-house teacher because they are in short supply.

Many state schools are also turning to video conferencing in response to budget constraints, especially those with sixth forms that are being hit by new funding rules that prevent them from subsidising post-16 courses from their general school budgets.

"Video conferencing gives our students access to real expertise in the subject," says Nichola Offer, Okehampton's head of science and G&T co-ordinator. "I've been amazed at how well they have taken it in their stride. Young people tend to do that. They grab things with two hands and get on with it."

Matthew Peacock, who has been using video conference technology to teach students from as far away as St Helena in the south Atlantic and British forces schools in Germany, says there is no real difference from standing in front of the class. It also has the distinct advantage of helping students to gain familiarity with communication technologies routinely used in the world of work.

"The students communicate with me regularly by email and submit all their written work online. They like the immediacy. I will get their marked assignments back to them before the next tutorial so there is immediate feedback and they can comment during the next lesson."

Lytchett Minster School in Dorset has been running video conference courses for six years and currently offers AS-level courses to Year 12 students in law, critical thinking and further maths. John Brickwood, the school's head of sixth form, says they decided to put on the further maths course after a member of the maths department left in the summer and they were unable to find a replacement.

"Where there is a definite need for the students you tend to go the extra mile to make things happen. There is indeed a definite need for further maths for students who are looking to go into engineering, especially if they are going to make an application to a top university. We needed to respond to that," he says.

The ability to provide a tailor-made course for a specific group of students at an affordable

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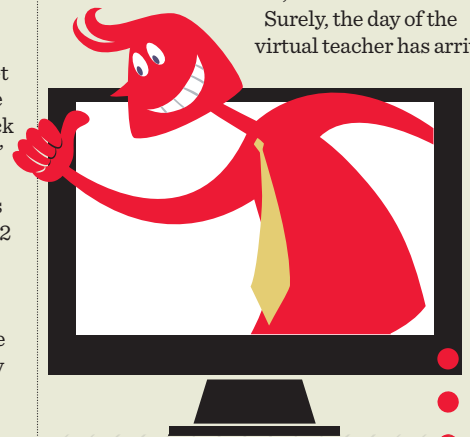
price has also proved attractive to Nick Crew, principal of UTC Sheffield. The pioneering college for 14 to 18 year-olds currently has five Year 12 students enrolled on an AS economics course provided by a video conference tutor. As Nick explains, the subject offers a good combination with students choosing it alongside one of the college's two main technical learning specialisms, engineering or digital media, plus another A-level course.

"In setting up the UTC, video conferencing has been an ideal way of enabling a small cohort of students to take a wider breadth of qualifications," he adds. "It enables them to take an A-level without impacting heavily on our budget, as it doesn't require a full-time member of staff."

It is this flexibility, enabling schools to put on extra courses by employing a specialist tutor at an affordable price, which is persuading a growing number of schools to use video conferencing to personalise the curriculum. What's more, students take naturally to it as a form of communication, says Matthew Peacock.

"My Year 10s and sixth form groups are now comfortably working in a virtual learning environment and are quite happy doing all their work and submitting it online," he confirms.

Surely, the day of the virtual teacher has arrived.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jeremy Sutcliffe is an education journalist and author of *8 Qualities of Successful School Leaders: the Desert Island Challenge* (Bloomsbury).