



The Virtual High School Non-profit Organization: Bringing ASL to online learners through video

Teaching American Sign Language online
with innovative video learning capabilities

Since its inception, The Virtual High School (vhslearning.org/) has given high-school and middle-school students more learning choices through its catalog of more than 200 unique online STEM, humanities and Advanced Placement courses. Recently, the nonprofit leveraged D2L's Brightspace platform and courseware to develop a new course in American Sign Language (ASL), harnessing D2L's cutting-edge video tools to help students and teachers from the hearing and deaf communities interact and gain new cultural perspectives.

AT A GLANCE

Student Number: 18,000+

Interviewees:

- John Englander, Associate Dean of Humanities
- Storie Walsh, VP of Technology



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John Englander, Associate Dean of Humanities, VHS

SUMMARY

When students in the U.S. pick a language to learn at school, ASL is one of the most popular choices. VHS decided to build an innovative set of online ASL courses, using Video Notes in D2L’s Brightspace platform to enable students and teachers to film themselves signing answers to questions. The first course offering proved instantly popular with students, achieving full enrollment within a month of its launch.

QUICK FACTS

- Delivers accessible, anytime learning for students at schools across the country
- Seamlessly integrates video to help students and teachers communicate in ASL
- Reduces teachers’ grading workload and increases consistency with D2L’s Rubric
- Educates a new audience in deaf culture and the importance of inclusivity

LISTENING TO STUDENTS’ NEEDS

The Virtual High School (vhslearning.org/) has built its success on partnering with schools and listening to the needs of their students and faculty and is always looking to expand its course portfolio to include courses that meet school and student needs.

John Englander, VHS Associate Dean of Humanities comments: “Every year we survey thousands of students and teachers, so we understand the

courses schools need. When we ask what new courses students would like to see, American Sign Language [ASL] is regularly one of the top answers. In recent years it has become one of the most popular language options for middle- and high-school students in the United States.”

HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY FOR A SMOOTH LEARNING EXPERIENCE

VHS was eager to develop an online ASL course to satisfy this demand—the only question was how to deliver a smooth learning experience for students and teachers. VHS started development using curriculum from Michigan Virtual, a fellow member of the Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance (VLLA), as a base. ASL is a physical, visual language, so it can’t be taught through textbooks alone. It is vital for teachers and students to be able to watch each other signing—so VHS realized that an interactive, video-based approach would be vital.

“We’ve finally reached a point where many less-resourced schools have access to laptops with webcams,” says Englander. “Most students and teachers now have the ability to make videos of themselves quickly and easily. That means that running a course in a visual language like ASL has finally become a possibility.”

Storie Walsh, VHS Vice President of Technology, adds: “At VHS we are committed to inclusivity and accessibility. We knew that running a course in ASL would help to ensure that a new generation of

students appreciate the challenges of communicating with friends or relatives with hearing impairments—so we had a real incentive to turn this vision into reality.”

GETTING ON SCHEDULE WITH ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

However, with VHS operating in more than 660 schools in multiple time zones across the United States and around the world, organizing an online class at a single time that would suit both teachers and students was almost impossible. For any course to be successful, students would need to be able to do much of their learning on their own schedule. To solve this conundrum, the company looked for a solution that could deliver a flexible, scheduled asynchronous, cohort-based approach to learning via video.

Moreover, since teachers would need to assess hundreds of videos and discussion posts to track their students’ progress, the solution also needed to provide tools to make the grading process as quick, easy and consistent as possible.

BUILDING ON A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

For more than 10 years, VHS has been using the D2L Brightspace platform to power all its online courses—so when the VHS team started planning its new ASL course, consulting D2L for advice and support was a natural first step.

“Over the years our relationship with D2L has grown stronger and stronger, especially as they have increased their focus on K-12 education and virtual educators,” says Englander.

“The key point is that the D2L team not only listens to customer feedback—they appreciate it and implement it in a systematic, almost democratic way. With all the focus groups, discussions and advisory boards we’ve participated in over the years, we’ve really built a true partnership between our two organizations.”

John Englander, Associate Dean of Humanities, VHS





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Storie Walsh, VP of Technology, VHS

VIDEO BRINGS LEARNING TO LIFE

As requirements were discussed, VHS identified D2L's Video Note tool in Brightspace as a central pillar in the design of the new ASL course.

“We've been experimenting with Video Note for a few years,” says Englander. “We had a revelation that the ability to upload and embed videos directly into the Brightspace web interface was perfectly suited to a visual learning experience.”

With Video Note, students can record themselves performing a signing exercise or assessment and upload the video to Dropbox, directly within the Brightspace interface. By eliminating the need to create videos separately and then attach them as external links or files, this provides a much more seamless user experience.

The feedback from our students is that the course's emphasis on recording and uploading their assignments is a significant motivator.

“If we didn't have these assignments I wouldn't practice as much as I do, so I think they're very helpful in learning proper signing.”

A VHS Student



PUTTING ACTIVITIES IN CONTEXT

The feature has proved to be equally useful when teachers are providing feedback to students, “If a teacher wants to show someone how to perform a particular sign, they can just embed a short video directly into the course webpage,” says Walsh. “The ability to see students' and teachers' videos in a single interface, together with group discussion posts and assignments, really helps everyone put their studies in context.”

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Of the four ASL teachers currently working with VHS, one of the teachers is deaf and another teacher is a child of deaf adults (CODA).

“What's interesting is that very few staff members knew that we have a teacher who is deaf,” says Englander. “D2L's Brightspace platform levels the playing field for everyone. We're passionate about building courses that allow everyone to participate on an equal footing, so this is a real win.”

MAKING GRADING EASIER

To streamline the grading process for the new course, VHS is also taking advantage of D2L's new and improved Rubrics tool in Brightspace.

“Time spent grading is regularly identified by our teachers as their number-one pain point,” states



Englander. “Before, we had to develop a separate PDF or Word document with grading criteria for teachers to follow, which was a cumbersome process. With the new Rubrics tool, we’ve developed rubrics that make it quick and easy to assess various aspects of students’ signing, such as the five parameters of ASL: hand-shape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non-manual signals.”

With the Rubrics tool in place, teachers no longer must spend time adding up the individual grades on each student video, discussion post or other assignment. Instead, the student’s total score is automatically calculated based on predefined weightings. This significantly reduces the administrative burden and frees up more time for teachers to spend interacting with their students.

ACHIEVING CONSISTENCY

By extending D2L’s Brightspace platform with the Video Note and Rubrics tools, VHS has been able to deliver a set of ASL courses that meet the same high standards as the rest of its curriculum.

“Rubrics help teachers ensure that grading patterns are consistent across all their classes,” explains Englander. “They also give us vital insight into where students are excelling and where they’re struggling. This helps us fine-tune our courses to make sure we’re

covering everything in the right level of detail and at the right pace.”

ENCOURAGING DISCUSSION

Englander comments: “The course comprises lessons backed up by videos, discussions and traditional graded exercises, and we assess everything with a numeric grade which keeps the students moving forward.”

In particular, group discussions are a key tool for addressing one of the focal points of the course—deaf culture. Instead of treating cultural studies as a separate topic from language learning, the D2L platform enables students and teachers to interweave the two aspects and give a more immersive insight into deaf people’s experiences.

Englander says: “You can’t disengage the culture from learning the vocabulary and phrases—each side enhances the other. By developing empathy and compassion for the deaf experience, students gain extra energy and engagement to learn the language. And because the discussions are part of the assessment, everyone participates. The asynchronous nature of online discussions in the Brightspace platform really helps with that—people who might not be confident to speak up in a traditional classroom often find it is easier to express themselves in our supportive online environment.”



He adds: “It’s great to get the students engaging with a perspective that may be far removed from their own experience, and it really helps to teach them to be aware of—and inclusive of—human diversity. That’s a thread that runs throughout the course, which is very powerful.”

One student commented: “I love how we are not only learning the language but also learning about deaf culture. Getting the background on deaf culture it made me understand it more and really cherish the language of ASL and its importance in the deaf community.”

TEACHING FROM A LEARNER’S PERSPECTIVE

VHS is also using D2L’s Brightspace platform to train newly recruited ASL teachers, with a six-week graduate-level course that focuses on online teaching methodologies. For teachers who haven’t taught an online course before, the VHS unique training model provides useful guidance on the differences between engaging with students face-to-face versus interacting asynchronously via the platform.

Since the training is delivered using the same tools as the ASL course itself, it also gives trainee teachers a direct insight into the online learning experience—helping them see the course from their future students’ point of view.

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE

The launch of the ASL course has been a major success—VHS enrolled five full classes of students within a month of the course opening for registration, and the feedback has been very enthusiastic.

Teachers have rated the platform as “user-friendly, easy to navigate, and fast and efficient”, and one mentioned that compared to other platforms, “Brightspace is so simple... with a platform like Brightspace, learning can truly be at the center of the experience.”

Meanwhile, many students are so engaged with the course content that they are using their ASL studies beyond the classroom. One wrote: “I love my American Sign Language class! I’ve been using the sign language that I learn with my four-month-old brother to try and get him to catch on at an early age!”

“We’re always trying to get students excited about learning and thinking about the future. With D2L’s help, we’re giving every teacher and student an equal chance to participate, and encouraging everyone in the class to speak up, share their views, and learn from others. We’re proud that we are able to provide this opportunity for accessible learning, not just with ASL, but across our whole course portfolio.”

Storie Walsh, VP of Technology, VHS

