



How the Upper Canada District School Board Uses the VLE

BACKGROUND

Connie Boros, Technology Enabled Learning and Teaching (TELT) contact for UCDSB, spoke to us about how UCDSB uses Ontario's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). At UCDSB, e-learning is very popular in secondary school, which includes a strong Day School eLearning program, a Continuous Intake eLearning program, and the Summer Semester during the month of July. Some unique ways they are using the VLE include for professional learning for HR purposes (AODA, New Employee Orientation, and Service Excellence), professional learning with training modules for eTeachers, and a small but robust credit recovery program. Connie also connected us with three amazing UCDSB educators who shared their stories about how they use the VLE in their classrooms.

AT A GLANCE

As one of the largest school boards in Ontario, the Upper Canada District School Board (UCDSB) is bordered by the St. Lawrence River to the south, Quebec to the east, Ottawa-Carleton to the north, and the lake district to the west. UCDSB serves over 27,000 students at 78 public schools, with 15 campuses offering Alternative and Continuing Education programming. Schools at UCDSB are supported by approximately 4,200 staff members, who are dedicated to giving students the best learning experiences possible every step of the way through their educational journeys.



USING THE VLE TO TEACH MATH TO BOTH ELEARNING AND BLENDED LEARNING STUDENTS

Kevin Gray is a math teacher at Thousand Islands Secondary School in Brockville, Ontario. Thousand Islands Secondary is a grade 7-12 school with approximately 750 students. Kevin teaches four online courses: Computer Programming, Calculus and Vectors, Data Management, and Advanced Functions. He also teaches one in-person class, Calculus and Vectors, to approximately 30 students. Much of his day is spent online using the VLE. To facilitate math education through the VLE, Kevin uses DESMOS, Excel, and other web-based tools that are readily available to his students. He even embeds DESMOS graphs, YouTube videos, and Excel files directly into the VLE to make his lessons interactive and engage students.

“The students really appreciate its [the VLE’s] ease of use and accessibility. The VLE really makes it easy to use and embed these tools.”
Kevin Gray, math teacher at Thousand Islands Secondary School in UCDSB

When asked what he likes about the VLE, the first thing he said was ease of use. He has found that because of the intuitive design of Brightspace (the learning management system the VLE is built on), students don’t have issues navigating and finding what they need to do. As a teacher, Kevin has also found that the VLE is easy to work with and easy to customize, and that the online and phone support for all the VLE tools and features is an added benefit. He has also found that, in particular, his high school students appreciate that they are able to use a VLE/ learning management system since they will likely be using one for continuing education at colleges and universities in the future.

“The VLE lets students always stay connected and learning. I expect students to be active in their educational journey, and the VLE lets this happen. Students can get immediate content and video support and be part of the ‘classroom’ at any hour of the day within the VLE. Even feedback (via interactive examples, work, and electronic communication) happens quickly with the VLE.”
Kevin Gray, math teacher at Thousand Islands Secondary School in UCDSB

“Generally, it was felt that because of the VLE, having inclement weather days did not necessarily mean that we also lost instructional days.”

Kevin Gray, math teacher at Thousand Islands Secondary School in UCDSB

USING THE VLE TO SUPPORT STUDENTS DURING INCLEMENT WEATHER DAYS

Thousand Islands Secondary School is located about one-hour south of Ottawa, along the St. Lawrence River. Most students travel to school by bus, with a small portion of students getting to school using personal transportation. When inclement weather strikes (around 10 inclement weather days per year), even when the school is open, but the buses are cancelled, Thousand Islands Secondary School is empty. Kevin reports to us that he sees a spike in VLE activity during inclement weather days, with approximately 75%-80% of his online students signing in to the VLE multiple times during each inclement weather day.

“Using the VLE allowed these students to still connect and communicate with other students. Lessons continued through the use of updated content, creating and adding embedded video support, and posting messages with the Calendar and Activity Feed tools. Using course email, instant messaging, and feedback, much more timely and interactive responses occurred between students and teachers who were online at the same time. Generally, it was felt that because of the VLE, having inclement weather days did not necessarily mean that we also lost instructional days.”

Kevin Gray, math teacher at Thousand Islands Secondary School in UCDSB

DYNAMIC DUO SHARES A LOVE FOR TEACHING AND THEIR THOUGHTS ON THE VLE

Natasha Charpentier and Rob Goodbun are teachers at Almonte District High School, a small rural school near Ottawa. Natasha teaches English, social sciences, and history; Rob teaches geography (both blended and online). Natasha and Rob have both been teaching for well over 20 years and have stated that “the VLE is essential to our daily teaching, both online and for day school blended models. We couldn’t teach without it.” Natasha, a self-described “hyper planner,” prefers to create her own content and course material in the VLE. Rob creates and edits his content pages regularly. They both use the Announcements feature for their blended classes to attach daily work, including handouts, notes, videos, and instructions. Their use of the Announcements feature allows the class to know what is coming while also giving students who missed a class the opportunity to quickly and easily access the missed content. Another VLE feature they use is the Assignments feature, which allows students to quickly submit work, letting them meet deadlines and receive timely feedback.

“We also love that students can use the Pulse app to remain on track in terms of getting notifications for calendar items, new announcements, emails, etc. For parents and students, using the VLE builds confidence in the teacher and the school, as students are never lost or missing key information.”

Natasha Charpentier and Rob Goodbun, UCDSB educators



SUPPORTING SCHOOL CLOSURES AND CLASS ABSENCES USING THE VLE

Natasha and Rob both told us that during inclement weather days their classes don't have to skip a beat, because the course instructions are already in the VLE and pop up automatically. Students are not required to log in from home, so engagement does vary, but Natasha has had multiple students contact her to say they had already logged in to the VLE and submitted work for the next day. During catch-up in school the following day, these students were able to lead the discussion in groups by taking on a leadership role with their peers. She stated that it was "a memorable experience" and has repeated it for several other snow days.

"We have used other types of programs, but so far the VLE offers the most inclusive model for us. It's almost a one-stop shop... Most importantly, the Announcement tool allows us to keep a year-by-year record of the timelines of what we did each day. We always import the announcements from the previous semester/year, editing as we go, so that we are roughly following the plan for the semester and simply deleting items we no longer use, creating new announcements as necessary, and even adjusting the time they might be released. The VLE keeps us so organized, and if kids are away, they know exactly what is going on!"

*Natasha Charpentier and Rob Goodburn,
UCDSB educators*

Natasha has also used the VLE to support students who were out on holiday with their families.

Here are some of the ways that the VLE supports Natasha's students:

- A student was going to miss the first 10 days of the semester. Natasha directed him to the class VLE page, and the student was able to follow along and submit work without being in the classroom.
- Students who miss school days because of sports (OFSAA) are able to follow along and catch up on missed material prior to an upcoming unit test.
- Students who miss class while working on group work and projects can connect with classmates through Portfolio to get their answers or facilitate and plan for presentations.

ACCESSING THE VLE

Ontario's VLE is a dynamic learning platform powered by D2L's Brightspace. The VLE is provided by the Ministry of Education at no cost to Ontario publicly funded school boards. Ontario's VLE includes tools to support digital portfolios, assignments, rubrics, lessons linked to curriculum expectations, quizzes, and much more! All K-12 public school teachers in Ontario have **free access to Ontario's VLE.**

To get the VLE for your classroom or school, reach out to your **TELT contact** or email **K12Ont@D2L.com**.