

## E-learning: the wave of the future

Kids today are born into a world in which computers play a significant role. Laura Fulton looks at how Dubai schools are utilising modern IT tools to revolutionise the way teachers teach, students learn, and parents participate in their children's education

Imagine the scene. Your kids are sitting at home on their computers, re-visiting an experiment they conducted earlier at school. They share information with their classmates via a chat room and submit their assignment over the internet before heading out to the park. Later, after dinner, they sit down with mum and dad to check how they did.

It may sound like something from a sci-fi movie, but such e-learning techniques are well on their way. In September, GEMS Education signed ITWare, the largest software professional services firm in Egypt, to develop and implement an e-learning initiative in all 33 GEMS schools in the UAE. Using the latest IT tools, these schools are set to re-examine traditional teaching methods that have fallen behind the times. 'Bringing computers into the classroom for all lessons in every subject is not a gimmick – it's an essential part of adapting the education system to fit the needs of the future,' says Helen Hamdy, ITWare Marketing Director. 'Students benefit from accelerated learning, teachers collaborate better with their colleagues and parents are able to monitor the progress of their children and communicate directly with staff, giving the school a far more central role in family life.'

One of the major features of e-learning, in fact, is the way in which it allows collaboration on all levels. Students research and submit assignments and share information with each other from anywhere with an internet connection. Teachers upload study material and provide feedback to students and parents can immediately monitor the progress of their children. Moms and dads can also review student assignments, receive grading and comments, check test scores, track class and school schedules, and share opinions and concerns with teachers and the school, all through the online system.

'The introduction of e-learning couldn't be timelier. It's a common complaint from businesses all over the world that schools are producing students who lack the skills employers want. It's only by embracing IT and interlacing it fully in the education process that the problem can be solved,' said Mohamed Fayed, chief officer of education infrastructure at GEMS Education. IT is a crucially



important part of many jobs now, and that's a trend that will only continue. You don't only need a computer at work for two or three one-hour sessions a week, so schools can no longer offer only two-or-three IT lessons a week; it needs to become a central part of the learning process.'

The long-term effects of e-learning could be quite significant. Students can more easily become critical thinkers, share information, and work with others to solve complex problems across the curriculum. 'One out of ten students today will eventually work in jobs that haven't yet been invented,' says Wael Amin, president of ITWare. 'It's crucial that they be prepared with the skills and knowledge for that future and that preparation requires adapting the education system to fit the needs of that industry.'

So does e-learning deliver all that it promises? It already has in some schools. Magdy El-Koray, ITWare education/engagement manager, points to the success of a pilot project conducted a few years ago at a school in Kent, England. The school reported

students in Year 10 doing AS-level work two years ahead of schedule, while others were now working at Year 13 or first-year university level. The key to this success lies not in

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rewriting the curriculum but rather in enhancing the learning and teaching process. 'I think technology has offered us the opportunity to quite radically re-think the way in which pupils learn and teachers teach,' says El-Koray.

It's a system that's especially useful for eager students, who can find their school year interrupted by travel.

Amin recalls a student involved in one ITWare project who had to travel with his family to Australia for one month. 'The e-learning system allowed him to continue following up on his classes and allowed his teachers to communicate with him on a daily basis. This meant that the student did not miss any classes and was able to catch up on his education.'

A trend as good as the educational benefits is the way in which e-learning will be able to save schools money, savings that could transfer into more reasonable tuition costs by making the education process and eliminating the redundant work associated with grading and exams.

Though the GEMS schools have yet to implement the programme, hopes are high for widespread success. Already 300 teachers have been trained to use the system and are currently transferring their skills to other teachers in their respective schools. Time will prove the success of e-learning in Dubai, but one thing is certain: technology is here to stay, so the sooner schools get online, the better.