

St Stephen's: eLearning is about more than technology



Peter West with Saint Stephen's College students. **Picture:** Lyndon Mechiels



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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 “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 technology itself that's the problem. It's 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, we want to allow schools to focus on what really matters — learning.” We were one of the schools in this area to go for a bring-your-own laptop program, he said.

“We spent two years building our online learning environment, getting it up to speed so I could say to parents: ‘This is a window into a learning environment, rather than just an expensive typewriter.’ so that all your kids can do is research on the internet and type notes. We’ve just wasted a lot of 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 don’t want to go back to timetabled classes.”

When Mr West checked the usage of Blackboard — 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 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 than handwritten notes. Handwriting is more effective for note-taking. So we’ll 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 “learning laptops” used in the classroom inhibited communication with “distractions” facing students.

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.