

Acocks Green Primary School use Podcasting to Improve Communication with Parents – with Flo-Joe Training

Background

Keeping parents better informed and involved with their child's learning is a key factor in educational performance.

“ Good parental engagement is fundamental to children's learning and closely linked to increased attainment. One of the more effective ways for parents to engage in their child's learning is to maintain good communication with a school, learning more about their child's progress whilst also helping to identify any development or performance issues early on.”

(Schools and Parents: A New Partnership: Becta 2009)

The same research shows, however, that over 59% parents contact their teacher just once a term or less and that 1 in 5 parents say they don't see any benefit in regular parent-school contact. Therefore the need to improve parent engagement is a pressing concern.

Rob Driscoll, (pictured right) Assistant Head at Acocks Green Primary School (AGPS), was well aware of this need and keen to support the use of new technology to improve the quality of dialogue between school and parents. AGPS is a successful, ethnically diverse Primary School situated between Birmingham and Solihull with approximately 500 pupils.

The school is well known for its use of new technology and has been awarded Becta's ICT Mark. Recent initiatives to improve parent-school communication include:

- an online version of the monthly School Newsletter
- a (password-protected) intranet for information about pupils' homework with extra resources
- daily updates on classroom activities and pupil achievements using Twitter
- reminders, 'Well Done' messages and general school information through SMS texts sent to parents' mobile phones



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Rob Driscoll
Assistant Head,
Acocks Green
Primary School

Podcasting: Another Communication Tool

Always on the lookout for new ways to engage parents, Rob's attention was drawn to another key technology at a recent training event:

“ The Head (Julia Dodson) and I went on a training day to do with communication across all levels and different media. Podcasting kept appearing in people's speeches and leaflets and it really hammered home to us that it was something which we knew we had to look at seriously.”

Rob had been struck by the opportunities offered by podcasting to give parents an insight into what goes on in the classroom:

“ It seemed a fantastic way of showing what the children are doing in school and give real-time examples of poetry recitals, school assemblies, singing or reading some of the work that they’ve done. Parents who can’t get into school, at the click of a button, can actually get real feedback on what their child is doing at school.”

Rob termed this opportunity ‘distance showing’ and was keen to equip the teachers with the skills and confidence to implement a new podcasting strategy at AGPS.

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Definition:

Podcasting is the production of ‘radio show’ style recordings, produced with easy-to-use tools and distributed over the Internet as live or downloadable audio files to be played whenever the listener has time.

Choosing Flo-Joe Training and Consultants

Rob has responsibility for ICT within the school and regularly holds in-house training events for teachers, but in this instance the school felt the preferred solution would be to bring in an expert to run podcast training for teachers. It was important that the subject was presented in an engaging and knowledgeable manner but also that teachers were left feeling able to use podcasting confidently, independently and effectively.

Flo-Joe Training and Consultants is a Birmingham-based company with extensive experience both in podcasting within education and in running first-class teacher training events for learning technologies. In addition to their training services, Flo-Joe runs an award-winning publishing company aimed at the ELT (English Language Teaching) sector. The company have used podcasting extensively for several years to reach learners around the world and have shared this expertise at local and national training events.

Implementing the Training

Following a preliminary discussion with Flo-Joe, Rob decided to run three one-hour sessions giving teachers the chance to reflect on issues covered after each session rather than dealing with everything on one longer half-day event.

“ Something could be shown to them in a fairly short space of time. Teaching staff would have the opportunity to experiment on their own before picking up the next stage the following week, extending what they had done, before being given further tasks.”

The workshops were timetabled for consecutive Monday afternoons over a three-week period. Flo-Joe worked closely with Rob beforehand to make sure the training sessions ran successfully. This included:

- a general chat to ascertain the ICT skills of the teachers
- advice for the school technician on downloading the required free software to the school network and ensuring access to key websites
- a mini-audit of the school’s hardware for podcasting (microphones and headsets)
- a pre-session visit from Flo-Joe to make sure everything was in working order ready for the first workshop.

The Sessions

During the sessions teachers were introduced to examples of podcasting being used by primary schools both in the UK and abroad and with constant emphasis given to how engaging with this technology can benefit parents and children. As Rob explained:

“ All the time, it wasn't simply the idea that maybe one day we could consider using this, we were given examples of how it was being used and how we could use it.”

The teachers learnt the practical skills needed to edit and manipulate audio files, practising with pre-recorded interviews and jingles as well as recordings of their own. They were soon 'mixing tracks' into longer podcasts.

They also learnt how to produce professionally-sounding recordings and how to host and distribute their finished 'radio shows'.

The Evaluation

The training was a great success. Feedback was unanimously positive with teachers praising the engaging and reassuring style of delivery and how informative and well paced the sessions had been:

“ ... ample time for demonstrations, questions, good humour, time for playing & practising and so many examples for us to look at from schools who have already done so much in podcasting.”

Flo-Joe's practice of making the training material available online both before and after the scheduled events gave teachers the chance to look through the material after each session as well as enabling those who couldn't attend sessions the chance to catch up.

Next Steps

Rob is very confident the teachers have not only embraced the idea of podcasting but can't wait to get started. Parents can now look forward to hearing more about their child's progress at Acocks Green over the coming months. Rob expects to see it being used to showcase children's work in various curriculum areas including reading poetry, carrying out interviews on school trips, taking part in science projects and featuring their progress in Modern Foreign Language podcasts. As for the teachers, Rob's looking forward to seeing podcasting being used to set homework, explain projects to parents and children in more detail and give feedback on class work and overall class performance. ■

Update!

Acocks Green Primary is now publishing podcasts which are available to listen to on the school website. The teachers now plan to set up a Podcasting Club run by volunteer pupils. Visit the site below and enjoy the work of the pupils and teachers:
<http://birmingham.schooljotter.com/acocks/Podcasts!>

Further Reading:

The Next Generation Learning campaign, initiated by Becta, is aimed at supporting schools in using technology to its full potential.

'Parents as Partners in Learning' provides information on how to use technology to improve communications with parents. This and 'Schools and Parents: A New Partnership' are available from the Next Generation Learning website:

<http://www.nextgenerationlearning.org.uk>

Contact Us:

To find out how Flo-Joe Training and Consultants can help your school embrace new technology such as podcasting, contact us at:

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