



Choosing Online Learning Environments



This guide will provide you with information to help you when choosing an online environment for learning for your school or kura.

This guide is intended for use by Senior Leaders and Boards of Trustees (BoTs), and assumes no technical expertise.

Online Learning Environments (OLE) provide a range of tools that work together to create a student-centric learning experience. The tools support an exchange of information between a learner, their teachers, their peers and their parents/whānau through digital media. Those tools can provide valuable enhancement to learning when they are integrated into learning programmes based on educational theory and practice. They often have a ‘classroom’ where assignments can be set and submitted, where a range of resources can be provided and exchanged and where on-line discussions and collaborative work can be facilitated.

Schools in New Zealand have been using Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Moodle, Ultratnet, Schoology, Knowledgenet for some time. Many of these kinds of Online Learning Environments (sometimes known as Virtual Learning Environments) continue to be developed and used in schools. More recently schools are using Microsoft’s Office 365 and Google’s G Suite as their OLE.

Schools often ask, “Which environment should we choose?” However, the better question might initially be, “Why should I choose an online learning environment at all?”

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Once you have read this guide you are welcome to contact the Connected Learning Advisory to get more personal assistance. We aim to provide consistent, unbiased advice and are free of charge to all state and state-integrated New Zealand schools and kura. Our advisors can help with all aspects outlined in this guide as well as provide peer review of the decisions you reach before you take your next steps.

For more information visit www.connectedlearning.org.nz

Check out our resources at resources.connectedlearning.org.nz

Call us for personalised service on 0800 700 400

Make a personal inquiry via our online form at query.connectedlearning.org.nz

Email info@connectedlearning.org.nz

Online Learning Environments - The ‘Why?’



“Our vision is for young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, and

There is growing evidence to suggest that learner-centric approaches promote the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to work collaboratively with others. This is consistent with the key competencies of the New Zealand Curriculum/Te Marautanga o Aotearoa.

In “Alive in the Swamp” (<http://bit.ly/1TYzkxh>) Michael Fullan and Katelyn Donnelly suggest that “technology acts as an enabler to make learning quicker, clearer and better”, and online environments which are well-designed, intuitive and based on the needs of the student and their learning will provide digital tools which are “participatory, engaging, co-creative and collaborative”.

lifelong learners.” - The New Zealand Curriculum

“Rather than using technology to do old things in new ways, it is about doing new things in new ways”. - Enabling e-Learning (<http://bit.ly/eel-vision>)

Building a rationale for change



The whole school community has to be committed to the goal to make it work.

To build the trust of the whole school community, it is important that the school leadership is able to share and articulate why an online environment is necessary in the first place, and then why they have chosen one over another. Using the [Strategic Thinking Roadmap](http://str.connectedlearning.org.nz) (str.connectedlearning.org.nz) will help you to implement a strategic direction that ensures technologies such as your OLE are integrated into a school-wide drive for effective teaching and learning.

The choice of environment should flow on from your vision for your learners. Consider first, “what are we trying to achieve for our learners?”, and the environment then becomes an agent of change. It prompts teachers to examine how the technology can support learning and leads to a shift in thinking about their practice. Have a look at some of the stories on Enabling e-Learning to see how learning has been transformed using online environments. (<http://bit.ly/1XzaSRp>)

The online environment should provide flexible approaches to learning and teaching to meet the varied needs of learners in your school. It should enable teachers to design learning programmes which allow students to pick their own pathway, select activities which meet their learning needs whilst also challenging them to push their own boundaries. Having multiple means of representation, action and expression leads to greater engagement with learning.

Once you have clear ideas about how you’d like the environment to support learning, you can examine the aspects of the online environment and decide which is most appropriate for the needs of your school community.

Considerations for choice of OLE



Whether you are starting from scratch or looking to change, make your review of the environments you are considering specific; prioritise the aspects that you have highlighted as being essential to start off with and then broaden your scope using the considerations listed below. Endeavour to be objective - it’s not about your own opinions or leanings towards the environment, but about how well it works for people to achieve the desired pedagogical outcomes.

If you already have an LMS or some sort of online environment that you are using to support learning, it is important to take time to do some research and to review and critique what is happening with your existing environment before you make decisions about changing it. What are the aspects that work well for students and teachers, what doesn't work well, what would you like it to do now and in the future? Then compare other possible environments using the same criteria.

It is advisable to gather information from external sources by talking to other schools, joining online discussions and reading a range of reviews.

Hands-on trialling with students and staff is essential to find out how an environment works for you in your context. The trial can form part of a teacher's inquiry process which will provide you with valuable evidence and data as you move forwards to make your decisions and roll out to the rest of the school.

Overall, to ensure widespread adoption of the OLE, the key two factors to ascertain are:

- ease of use
- usefulness

Some specific features and functions to consider include:

Access

The OLE should provide easy access to tools to aid learning and teaching for all - students, teachers, their whānau and the wider community. It needs to be engaging, adaptable, connective, and easy to access on any device at any time.

Technical

- the ease of the environment to implement and on-going maintenance required
- how well the environment operates and integrates alongside other systems such as your SMS and other software or services you use such as support for single sign on
- the ease of access to and use of data
- the security of data within the environment

Environment Capabilities

- the ease of use for learners, school staff, whānau etc
- the range and suitability of software, functionality or content available
- performance across devices
- the ease of collaboration
- the speed to log-in and use
- compatibility with touch interfaces on devices for writing, drawing and annotating
- how the environment supports all learners? e.g. read/write functionality, text to speech

Communities of Learning and transitions between schools

Consider what other schools and Communities of Learning in

your area use. Transitioning between schools can be a stressful time for students and a time when engagement in learning declines. While there are many suggested reasons for this dip, one element is a change in the learning environment. Continuity of a familiar environment may help children adapt more easily and focus on learning rather than coping with new and unfamiliar systems.

As more and more students have learning portfolios which track their learning and progress you need to consider how the evidence of their learning follows them as they transition between schools. Schools use a wide variety of eportfolios such as blogs and websites so it is important to examine how the different environments integrate them.

Support & Costs

As well as initial installation costs, it is important to consider ongoing technical support which may be required from the OLE provider or technical support companies. Costs associated with ongoing professional development for all staff to develop their capabilities cannot be underestimated or undervalued. How can you maximise the expertise you already have in school to provide ongoing support for teachers and develop sustainability?

School Administration

Online environments can work across the whole school and it is important to address the needs of administrative staff too. How will your choice of environment impact on the work of the finance department, office staff, caretaking staff, etc? All staff need to be included in discussions and in ongoing training and support.

Is it possible to run two environments?

Some schools run two or more similar online learning environments in parallel. This requires careful thought and management from both a technical and pedagogical point of view to run them successfully. It is important to be clear what the benefits of running two environments are. Consider how a dual system will benefit your learners and support their learning. Do the different environments provide different tools for learning which provide greater choice for learners?

Conversely, what are the risks involved in running two environments? Adults who are comfortable with a product may find it challenging to move away from it and will need support to switch between environments. While students can be quite adept at selecting and using the right tool for the right purpose and easily switch between environments, too much variety can lead to confusion. This could be a barrier to learning.

Privacy and Storage of documents

The issue of privacy and security of documents especially those of a sensitive nature is part of the bigger picture of school management of data. The concerns raised about the security of cloud servers and how data might be shared is, and will be, an ongoing debate. One benefit of cloud storage is that it cannot be destroyed by local failure or accident.

The Privacy Act doesn't provide specifically for schools but states that organisations are responsible for ensuring that personally identifying information is protected "by such security safeguards as it is reasonable in the circumstances to take." Principle 5 in the publication "[Privacy in Schools: a guide to the Privacy Act for principals, teachers and boards of trustees](#)" states that "Schools have an obligation to take care of the personal information they hold. There need to be reasonable measures in place to avoid loss of information or unauthorised access or use."

Considering how key data is backed up either in another cloud-based solution or an onsite server is highly recommended.

Professional Learning



The choice of OLE can significantly influence practice so if the environment is easy to use barriers are removed and people move more quickly to looking at how it enhances learning. It becomes 'invisible' as a tool because it is just another tool in your kete of teaching resources.



Image: Syba Academy's Seven Principles of Effective Professional Learning

<http://www.sybaacademy.com.au/announcements/your-professional-learning-journey-a-new-year-new-challenges-and-a-new-academy>

“How do we challenge the way that professional learning has traditionally been structured and make it more consistent with modern learning practice that is collaborative, creative, daring and challenging and meets the needs of all teachers in your school?”

If you are introducing an environment that will act as an enabler for more effective learning it is essential that you consider how your teachers learn how to make the best use of it. The tools which are part of the environment will only enhance learning if they are used in a way which is “participatory, engaging, co-creative and collaborative”. So teachers need time to design learning programmes that are intuitive and based on the needs of the student and their learning.

There are three areas to consider when planning a programme of professional learning:

- The nuts and bolts of how the environment works, e.g. filing, uploading material, designing documents, sharing folders, understanding the email system, calendars. All staff and students need to feel comfortable and confident using the tools in the environment so time needs to be given to learning and practising.
- Pedagogy - integrating the technology into effective learning programmes based on educational theory & practice. Making the shift in thinking to change practice is not easy but it is important to support teachers as they explore how to work together for the benefit of student learning outcomes using the OLE. The teaching as inquiry framework offers a valuable approach to exploring effective practice using an online environment; it can be applied to all learning contexts so teachers can work from a position of strength.
- Time to assimilate new ideas is important so a measured timetable of Professional Learning which is responsive and respectful to support staff as they shift their thinking and practice is essential. Professional Learning Groups are useful so teachers don't feel isolated; they can work together to support each other as they build their skills, problem solve and share ideas and resources. It is

	<p>important that staff can focus on developing their practice in the context of students' needs.</p>
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OLE checklist



Topic	Considerations	School Notes
Infrastructure and Technical		
Set Up	How easy is the environment to implement and what on-going maintenance is necessary?	
Compatibility with other systems in school	How well does the environment operate alongside and integrate with other systems such as your SMS and other software or services you use?	
Costs	Consider ongoing costs for managing the system as well as setup cost. Training for staff should also be considered.	
Speed	How quickly does the environment respond as users load the system? How responsive are the apps?	
Available Apps and Functions	<p>Consider what elements for learning are available and how you will use them. It is important to note that not all OLE will include all of these elements but some you might like to consider are;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Word processor Spreadsheet Presentation Email Drawing / Publishing Website creator Form/questionnaire/quiz creator with automatic analysis generated Maps Digital Classroom Video & Audio calls Chat or discussion fora Blogging Text to Speech 	

	<p>In doc voice recording Additional 3rd party apps Assignment submission Collaborative notebooks Eportfolios Blog Social media communities</p>	
Storage	<p>What types of files can be stored/uploaded? What is the storage limit? What will you store in the cloud and what will stay on a physical server? Backups and disaster recovery? What will the issues be (if any) if the cloud service is not available?</p>	
Compatible devices	<p>Consider the devices that you currently have in school and also what you anticipate having. How well will those devices work with the cloud environment you choose? Will it work across a range of devices? Do you have BYOD and what devices do you ask students to bring? What do you provide in school?</p>	
Operating Systems	<p>Which operating systems and browsers does it work best on?</p>	
Pedagogy		
Sharing	<p>How well can you share documents and folders? Will you expect to share across schools in your CoL? Or from your feeder schools?</p>	
Collaboration	<p>How easy is it to collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously</p>	
Classroom Environment	<p>Does the OLE have a classroom environment where teachers can share resources and where students can interact with each other and the teacher? How easy is it to use?</p>	
Professional Development	<p>Does the environment provider provide professional development for teachers and admin staff? What PL will your staff need? How will you plan for that? How familiar are they with similar products? How willing</p>	

	are they to learn?	
Accessibility of use	How easy is the system to use for all students and staff? Is it easy to upload and download photos, videos, documents, presentations on a variety of devices?	
Transition	What happens to student work when students move from one school to the next? How easy is it to download their folders and then upload to a new environment? What happens to old accounts?	
Retention of files & privacy	Retention of student information within the OLE is something that schools will also need to consider. e.g. NCEA materials.	

Overall, what is the *Ease of use & Usefulness* of the OLE?

Further Reading



[Making effective use of VLEs](#) - Blog by Derek Wenmoth

This guide has been produced in response to a number of specific queries about choosing online learning environments from schools. It should not be read as a recommendation or endorsement of any specific product. The Connected Learning Advisory is a Ministry of Education supported service that provides schools with technology information relevant to their queries and does not recommend one product over another.



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