

The Ultranet and school libraries

By Pam Mancell

Introduction

The Victorian State Education system is a complex and varied beast. Schools can be large, medium or small, multicultural, rich or poor, isolated, regional or suburban. No two schools are the same, yet all are required to educate students using 21st century tools, no matter how hard it is for them to fund such tools. That's where the Ultranet fits in. The Ultranet is being developed by the Department of Education and Early Childhood development to provide equitable access to learning support for students and communities across the state.

What is the Ultranet

The Ultranet is an on-line portal that allows collaboration between teachers, students and parents in meeting the learning goals of each student. It is provided free to all Government schools, is secure and can be accessed via the web from anywhere at any time. According to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The Ultranet benefits the entire Victorian government school community. It will help improve the educational outcomes of all Victorians:

- Students will have access to an online learning platform designed to meet their current and future learning needs. They will use educational tools that will engage them and remain relevant to their lives and future careers.
- Parents, teachers, school leaders and staff will be able to interact with the Ultranet to improve student learning outcomes and contribute to their school community.
- Regional and central offices of the Department will have access to unprecedented information to support policy development and system improvement. (Ultranet – The Benefits, 2010)

All teachers now have access to the Ultranet, and it is being rolled out to students and parents in each school, determined by their own implementation plan. Some schools are taking a slowly-slowly approach, while others are surging full steam ahead.

The Ultranet is divided into nine discrete spaces and two icons connecting to resources and tools, all of which are available to teachers, and some available to students and their parents. Each can be accessed via Global Navigation icons that appear at the bottom of the screen, similar to the dock that Mac users will be familiar with.

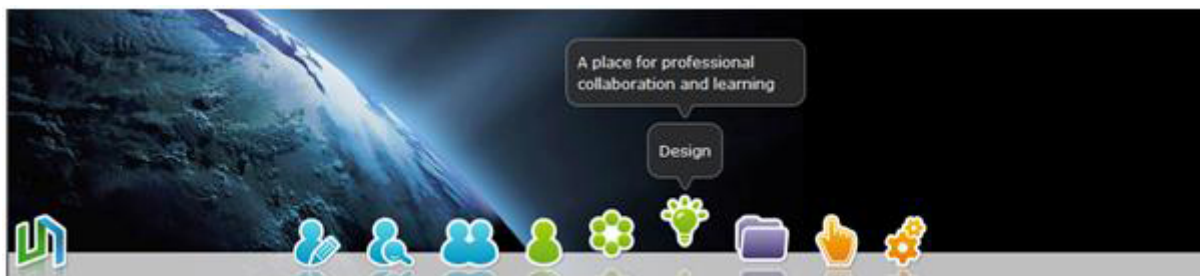
1. Home Page. This is a personal page for each student, teacher and parent. School and community notices can be posted here, and students and teachers can add their favourite applications, such as wikis and blogs. I have included a calendar and RSS feed on my home page, although there is no compulsion to include anything other than the basics. My school intends to put the daily bulletin here for all to see, but as we don't have all members of our school community logging on at the beginning of every day, we're not there yet.



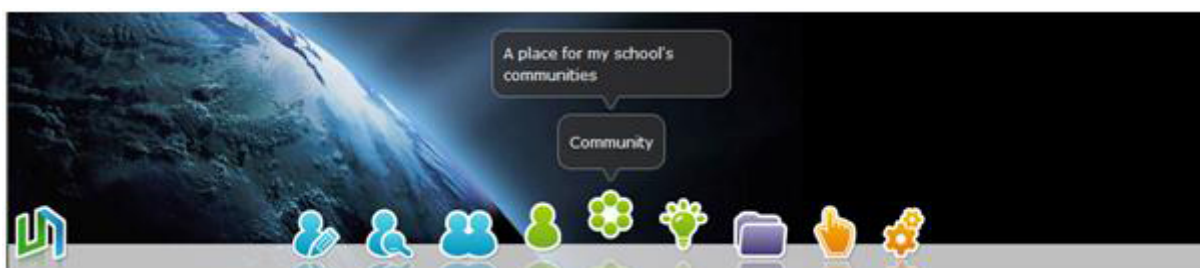
2. **eXpress Space.** The eXpress space is a little like your wall on Facebook. Teachers can allow or invite learning contacts and portfolio viewers (DEECD staff) to view some or all of the space, which includes a landing page, wall, profile and portfolio. My school is using the portfolio space to record progress on our personal and professional goals as part of our Performance and Development process. For students, the space can be viewed by portfolio viewers only (the teachers at their school) and includes a landing page, profile, learning portfolio and learning goals.



3. **Design Space.** The design space is designed to be a place for professional collaboration between teachers. It is not available for students or parents. Teachers can set up design spaces or join those set up by others. Each school should develop its own protocols about how staff will use the design space. At present, we have established our design spaces around faculties, so that faculty teams can develop and upload curriculum documents, assessment tasks, rubrics and so on. All teachers in the faculty are expected to contribute to the space and can access and use the contributions of others. I have established a library design space that has a wiki and a reference library. It could also have other applications such as blogs and message boards. We use it for sharing ideas about our library and for uploading the materials relating to our reading program and VCE tutorial program.



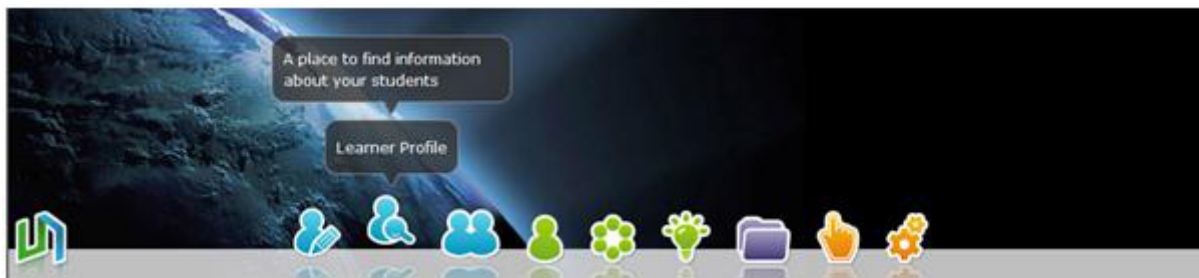
4. **Community Space.** This is a place where various school groups can establish a presence. School Council and its various sub-committees, Student Council, Debating Teams, Sporting Teams and so on can all create spaces here. There is a reasonable scope for schools to develop their own 'look' on these pages, so they will be developed with an overall school image in mind. This is the most likely place that our library will establish a web presence, but as we are not ready to establish community spaces yet, this will have to wait. All members of the school community will be able to access these spaces, and some will be globally available, depending on their purpose.



5. **Collaborative Learning.** This is the place where students and teachers collaborate and engage in learning activities using a range of web 2.0 applications. Teachers can create collaborative pages and allow students access. These spaces can include blogs, wikis and polls. Students can collaborate with each other about aspects of their learning. This is an ideal space for the library to create a blog about books and reading.



6. **Learner Profile.** The learner profile is where students' records can be found. These will become up-to-date (real time) records of student progress. Parents will be able to access the learner profile of their children at any time and see their attendance, progress, and comments from the teacher. The learner profile will travel with the child from school to school, including from primary school to secondary school. Records will be accessible to the child, his or her parents and to the child's teachers.



7. **Learning Tasks.** This is where teachers will plan learning tasks for their students, and where students will access learning tasks.



8. **My Content.** As the name suggests, this is where staff and students store their digital learning resources. Some of these will be of their own creation, and some will be school determined digital resources. Each user has a storage limit, so they can't fill their content folder with movie clips and large files. It's for content related to their learning or teaching and the user must verify that it is their work, or that they have permission from the copyright holder to upload it.



9. **Connect.** This is where students can find reviewed websites and online activities provided by DEECD. It is not available via a navigating icon for teachers or parents, only students. It links externally to Connect Primary and Connect Secondary FUSE site. The FUSE site is excellent, providing a fantastic range of websites and other digital resources for students. Teachers should be encouraged to locate resources here:

<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/pages/Teacher.aspx>



A screen dump from the Secondary Students section of FUSE:
<https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/secondary/pages/Default.aspx>

10. **Actions** are pretty much what they sound like. This is where teachers and students manage their pages, change layout, add applications and so on. The Ultranet provides a number of copyright-free designs from which users can select. The space/earth design you can see on the various images is one of them. There are others that appeal more to children and adolescents, but the range is limited. Applications include most web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis and message boards.



11. **Utilities** provides access to some useful information and sites. Of particular use is the utility to locate people (students at your school and DEECD staff), and the Ultranet Support Site. The support site is very comprehensive and includes video clips, PowerPoint presentations and instructional guides.



Where do school libraries and teacher librarians fit in?

The obvious role for school libraries is to provide a virtual presence, where digital resources, on-line subscriber resources and catalogues can easily be accessed by students anywhere, anytime. Unfortunately, there is no obvious place for this. Community is described as 'a place for your school's communities . . . The School Portal Administrator can set up and maintain the School Community space and develop its look and feel . . . Spaces can be created for other groups at your school, such as year levels, committees and clubs, to share resources to make it easier for them to communicate and work together' (Ultranet, Getting Started – Release 2, p. 5). Over time, this is most likely to be the place for a library presence, but as schools are grappling with other aspects of the Ultranet first, this isn't a high priority.

The most critical area of our work with the Ultranet so far has involved copyright. Teachers often assume that they can use anything they like for educational purposes without paying any attention to issues of intellectual property or copyright. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development makes it clear that teachers and students must always comply with copyright laws:

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The Ultranet allows sharing of materials, which means that we all need to be vigilant about the appropriate use of material that is not our own work. Uploading content to the Ultranet that was not created by your or DEECD can be a breach of the Commonwealth Copyright Act 1968 (Copyright Act). Ensuring that the Ultranet is compliant with the Copyright Act is everyone's responsibility. (Ultranet, Getting Started – Release 2, p. 8).

Further, over recent years DEECD has provided copyright kits to schools and has expected all staff to be informed about copyright law. This is not only to ensure that all DEECD employees comply with the law, but also to protect itself from liability. DEECD has made it really clear that it will not protect teachers who break the law. As I have conducted professional development sessions to staff at my school on copyright law and issues, teachers check with me if they are unsure how the law applies to their particular situation.

The Ultranet also has several checkpoints along the way to constantly remind us about intellectual property rights and appropriate use. You can't log on unless you check the box indicating that you agree to the terms and conditions of the Ultranet, which includes copyright compliance. Then, when uploading files, teachers must indicate that the material is theirs to upload, permission has been sought and granted from the copyright holder, or the material is copyright free. The same rules will apply to students, and this will provide an opportunity to explore intellectual property and copyright issues with them.

Interestingly, a whole host of other roles have presented themselves. Part of the implementation process for the Ultranet has been training 'Lead Users' in each school. Lead users are trained to teach other teachers about the Ultranet and how to use it. They were also engaged in developing their school's implementation plan. I am one of my school's lead users and have led a number of professional development sessions for teachers. This has allowed me to enhance our reputation as confident users of ICT in a range of contexts. As we are highly visible and available, teachers often pop in to the library with questions or queries about the Ultranet. Supporting teachers in their use of ICT has long been a role of teacher-librarians, and this is another example of that support. As our students are now being introduced to the Ultranet, we have taken on the role of supporting them as well. Being able to troubleshoot problems that users face, either with logging on or navigating their way around, is very much part of the resource role.

This fits well with our library ethos, where we view ourselves as the 'One Stop Resource Shop'. No matter what staff or students need, we are the first port of call. We have encouraged this as the school library needs to be the place where everyone comes when they don't know where else to go. We don't expect to be able to do or fix everything, but by asking the right questions we determine whether we can help or whether we need to send staff or students along to the right people. We have an outstanding IT support team as well as an excellent Professional Development Co-ordinator and ICT Co-ordinator. We don't do their job, rather we support them where appropriate. So, supporting our school community in their use of the Ultranet is a natural fit.

The key issue for us has been the delivery of resources to our staff and students. Traditionally, libraries house physical items, most notably books. The users come to the library, as generally that is easier than the book going to the user. Marketing people refer to this as 'pull marketing'. We try to get our users in the door, or to our website, to find the resources they need. There is nothing wrong with users coming to us. The problem is, so many don't. For many students (and teachers), libraries are irrelevant. We aren't on their learning radars at all. The Ultranet allows us to engage in 'push marketing'. We can identify digital resources that fit well with what our teachers are teaching, offer them links that they can embed into their collaborative spaces, and suddenly the best resources are under the noses of all of our students. We are just starting to do this with Clickview Home. The link to the required program can be embedded into the Ultranet and students can watch the program on any web-enabled device, anywhere, anytime. We are just beginning this journey, but it is exciting.

What does the future hold?

The Ultranet, like all Government policies, is subject to change, particularly when governments change. At the time of writing, no announcement has been made on the future of the Ultranet, but as implementation is continuing and some of the web pages related to the Ultranet have been updated, we can assume that it will continue to develop as the DEECD platform for on-line education delivery.

The Ultranet is far from perfect. Uploading content is slow, although the latest release has improved this markedly from the first release. Some of the features that were originally planned, like a wall for students, have been dropped, we assume because of the issue of teachers managing cyber bullying and other issues that plague social networking sites. Also, teachers are finding it hard to get enough time to really play with the Ultranet to improve their familiarity with it, so feel a little overwhelmed.

The Ultranet has enormous potential that will take time to realise. It is early days in terms of development. Like all on-line platforms we are at the beginning of time (Ultranet 1.0 if you like). It will continue to develop, and as data accumulates it will become an invaluable tool for all members of a school community.

Conclusion

The Ultranet has the potential to change the way we work and deliver information services to our school community. To remain relevant we will need to embrace the technology and constantly search for ways to include ourselves in the learning networks of our students. There will be no right way to do this. Each school, while having commonalities, will determine how it uses the Ultranet, based on the skills and expertise of its workforce. Northcote High School is a large school with a vibrant and well-used library and, for many teachers, web 2.0 tools are a normal part of their lives, so pushing ahead rapidly and trying new things is what we do. Over time, the Ultranet will be embedded in our working lives, and we will wonder what we did without it.

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Pam Mancell is the Library and Information Services Co-ordinator at Northcote High School.