

Tollbar MAT e-Library

A Case Study by Kevin Blake, Information and Communications Officer

Tollbar MAT serves more than 3,500 primary, secondary, and sixth form students on three sites, the largest of which is Tollbar Academy with 2200 students. We have been ranked outstanding on consecutive occasions by Ofsted, and also ranked in the top 2% of high-performing schools in the UK.

Tollbar Academy doesn't have a central library or librarian but does have a sixth form library and provides access to print books in individual classrooms. In 2013 we wanted to look at delivering electronic content in an easy and reliable way and were aware that e-Library solutions had recently been made available for UK schools. Our senior management tasked the IT department with recommending a suitable solution and after extensive investigation, including trials, we chose VLeBooks from Browns Books for Students. Browns were early implementers and their flexibility and willingness to listen to suggestions and work with us allowed us to proceed with confidence.

VLeBooks was developed and is supported entirely in the UK and as such content and functionality is targeted to best meet our needs. Categorisation by key stage, access restrictions by year groups, flexible purchasing options, and an intuitive student experience essential to allow use by students of all ages were all reasons we felt VLeBooks was the best platform for us. VLeBooks is also the only e-Library solution available to schools and also used extensively within HE & FE, thus providing our students with useful experience that will benefit them after they leave us.

In March 2014 Tollbar Academy purchased an initial selection of 2,500 eBooks. These titles were selected by the heads of our sixth form and English department and were centrally funded because our e-Library is regarded as a whole school solution. A range of both fiction and non-fiction across the full age range was purchased; selection was made simple because of the range of age appropriate content available.

We have chosen to authenticate our students with a simple username and password system and the setup required nothing more than providing a spreadsheet to Browns. Initially there was a technical issue with VLeBooks managing such a large number of simultaneous logins during set lesson times but this was very quickly addressed and there have been no further problems. Instant access is essential for all of our systems because of our 50 minute class changes. Each year our students are automatically moved to the next year group to give them access to the appropriate content.

Student rollout was initially targeted to our sixth form and by the English department across both primary and secondary students. This has now been expanded to include several other faculties and use of eBooks is becoming a normal part of school life. Every student has been shown how to access VLeBooks and we have also held sessions for parents so that they can assist their children if required. Most recently we have held sessions with our primary school parents to enable them to read eBooks with their younger children at home. The usage reports show that more than 1,100 students have read eBooks since VLeBooks was made available.

We have decided that as well as making the eBooks available to read online that we will also allow downloads to laptops and mobile devices for up to 5 days at a time, but in the future we will look at setting different limits for fiction and non-fiction. VLeBooks allows us to set limits on the number of days a student can download an eBook by type as well as for individual titles. The flexibility and control we have with the settings has allowed us to easily tailor VLeBooks to best suit our own requirements. Despite allowing downloads most students prefer to read using the cloud based reader which is used with any browser and requires no add-ons or plug-ins. For us this is the key component of our e-Library; it's simple and intuitive enough to be used by primary students but functionally rich enough to meet all the requirements of our sixth form. Features include easy navigation, page zoom, change background colour, full text search, integrated dictionary, note taking and sharing, printing, and copy/paste.

Tollbar Academy has more than one PC for every two students which are made available outside of normal lessons ensuring access for all. Our e-Library can also be accessed at any time from home or by students using their own smartphones and tablets. Feedback from both students and staff has been very positive and after 12 months we are seeing the benefits we expected: space saving, no lost books, ease of access, and better availability. It is also thought that eBooks are providing access to some students that would have otherwise been reluctant to read a print book. The ongoing support for VLeBooks requires absolutely no effort and Browns have always been excellent and responsive and eager to listen to suggestions and develop in partnership with us.

In the future we will continue to expand the use of eBooks by promoting suitable titles to the appropriate students. VLeBooks allows us to create bespoke lists which can be linked to from within our own VLE and other school resources by simply adding the link or QR code. We would also like to see even more comprehensive reporting by location and classroom to better monitor usage in the future. And lastly, it would be helpful if all publishers would make all suitable titles, both fiction and non-fiction, available as eBooks for school lending. However, we are already seeing a move towards this as more than 25,000 new fiction titles are being loaded from Harper Collins US, Faber & Faber, and other mainstream publishers. Pearson have also recently released more than 1000 additional eBooks onto VLeBooks.

In summary, the first 12 months of providing our VLeBooks e-Library at Tollbar Academy has been a great success and we are looking forward to an ever increasing range of titles and student usage in the coming years.

