

Tapping into tutors in the classroom

An ingenious concept that links school students with tutors online is being used by schools to address core literacy and numeracy skills.

The service, Your Tutor, works in real time, addressing real student issues, using an army of PhD students as the tutors. Students simply sign in, are linked with a suitable tutor, and off they go – conversing via instant messaging. They can also share websites and files.

The computer screen morphs into a whiteboard on which the student and tutor can draw, write and share information.

Licences for the service were originally sold into public libraries, with students using their library ID to log on, usually from home.

The service has subsequently been extended to schools, which receive additional services that are designed to help teachers reinforce key concepts around literacy and numeracy. The service can also be customised to meet individual schools needs.

Jack Goodman, CEO of Your Tutor, says schools can track how students are performing. The information can be individualised and also geared to track particular cohorts, such as low-SES, special needs and indigenous.

“NAPLAN provides only one data point a year,” says Goodman. “Here they can get one daily, weekly or as many times as you want.”

Early last year, St Columban’s College in Caboolture trialed the system with its Year 8 and 11 students. After seeing immediate benefits, it introduced it for all students this year.

“It coincided with the roll out of laptops on a one-to-one ratio this year. So it fitted in nicely with the whole-school approach of 24/7 access to online resources and support,” says assistant principal Les Conroy.

“It allows students to use the laptops more intensely. It means they can continue learning and working, even if it’s 10.30pm at night at home.”

Conroy says the anecdotal results from students and staff has been positive, but he would like to see greater uptake of the service.

“Students seem to be using it heavily in peak time around exams and when assignments are due. We’re seeing about 30 per cent usage per month, with up to 40 to 50 per cent in peak times.

“The students who are using it say they found it helpful in solving problems, networking, getting access to support and guidance. Some teachers are using it as part of their homework strategies – flagging with students they should use the service when they get stuck at home, or to get an opinion on an essay draft, for example.”

Goodman says their their research shows the service makes a very tangible difference to academic abilities, with 96 per cent of users saying it helps to improve their marks and 95 per cent reporting the service has improved their academic confidence.

Importantly, tutors, who are made up of an army of postgraduate students across Australia, never provide answers.

“The whole premise is that the tutor will highlight key areas and give suggestions, but they won’t rewrite or give solutions.

Currently, 45 per cent of private sessions are maths based, 18 per cent English and 18 per cent science. The balance is made up of sessions involving research and study skills.

Goodman says content will be added to the schools program, called Skills Builder, as the national curriculum is implemented.