Gifted Education Factsheet #004: Virtual Learning Environments as a Service Setting

Definition

A virtual learning environment (VLE) is an instructional service setting that uses technology for delivery and interaction, including teaching and learning tools designed specifically to enhance a student's educational experience. As with traditional courses and gifted services, the depth, breadth and pace of the curriculum must be differentiated. A VLE also must provide an appropriate level of challenge in the student's area of identification for the required number of minutes, according to the Operating Standards. In addition, the student must have direct access to the instructor. In the case of the VLE this is accomplished using the most appropriate technology available, such as e-mail, instant messaging, forums and chat rooms.

VLEs can be synchronous (in real time), asynchronous (not in real time) or a combination of the two. A part-time VLE also may be combined with face-to-face instruction. Asynchronous courses, in which the student does not receive immediate feedback on work or answers to questions, are not recommended for some students. A VLE is distinguished from a learning center in that a learning center takes place in a face-to-face classroom environment as a form of technology integration, and a VLE takes place at a distance. Both a VLE and a learning center, however, should have an adequate amount of student-teacher contact, whether in person (for a learning center) or online (for a VLE). Also, both should take place during the school day.

The following paragraphs describe acceptable forms of VLEs that may be used with gifted students.

Asynchronous VLEs

The oldest and most popular asynchronous VLEs are online courses that use the Internet as an essential instructional resource and delivery mechanism. Traditionally these courses used multimedia formats to provide lecture-based content. The lecture formats may be text-based, include video or animations, or employ flash technology to present information normally conveyed by the instructor in face-to-face courses. In these courses, students log in any time, review materials and communicate via discussion boards. Teachers can log in any time to see what the students have been working on and to participate in discussion boards. These interactions take place online, but the student and the instructor need not be online at the same time.

In many cases, the course will utilize computer adaptive technology to provide feedback to students. In this case assessments are designed to provide immediate feedback on incorrect answers or direct students to

additional information based on a response. In addition, students are required to submit work on a scheduled basis. That work is graded, and the instructor provides feedback.

Synchronous VLEs

Synchronous VLEs can include live video conference lectures, real-time teacher interaction online or asynchronous activities such as e-mail, taking place during the same time period. Generally, courses are accessed via the Internet at a scheduled time. As a result the teacher may be presenting information online, live, using voice-over technology, or the student and teacher may be online simultaneously working on a project and corresponding as necessary using discussion boards or e-mail. Courses offered in this way often provide access to a streaming video archive or tape/DVD libraries that also may be viewed asynchronously. Common courses offerings in this category include advanced placement (AP) and college courses. This option may require a fast video Internet (T-1) connection or wide bandwidth cable internet service, if utilizing video technology.

Asynchronous/Synchronous Combination VLEs

Often courses are not completely asynchronous or synchronous, but a combination of the two. For example, traditional asynchronous lectures (recorded video or PowerPoint presentations) may be supplemented by real-time virtual classroom sessions in which students and instructors interact via chat sessions or instant messaging. On the other hand, synchronous video conference sessions may be supplemented by an asynchronous discussion, after class, via discussion boards, e-mail and other interactive formats relevant to the platform (WebCT, Blackboard or Moodle). VLEs for gifted instruction may be synchronous, asynchronous or any combination deemed appropriate for the grade level and individual needs of the student defined in his or her WEP.

Part-time VLE/Face-to-Face:

This option may be designed by a GIS who is assigned to multiple buildings with similar grades. Partial services are provided to students in a face-to-face manner either in resource or general education team teaching classrooms, as dictated by the GIS schedule. The remaining required minutes are provided by supplemental online curriculum designed and monitored by the GIS. The intent is that the online option is a replacement of what would have been done face-to-face, and therefore extends the regular curriculum or activities normally conducted by the GIS.

Using VLE as a Gifted Service Setting

For a VLE to be considered a gifted service as offered either by the gifted intervention specialist (GIS) or in the regular classroom, the VLE must conform to other aspects of the Operating Standards for Identifying and Serving Gifted Students (OAC 3301-51-15).

Services Provided by a GIS (EMIS coded "206XXX" or "GE")

1. Contact Time. If the option is being offered by a GIS, students must be engaged with the material for no less than 225 minutes for students in kindergarten through fifth grades, and 240 minutes for students in sixth through 12th grades. This can be documented by use of a teacher schedule, discussion boards, chat options and direct e-mail. The instructor must monitor and interact with the student in a systematic way consistent with the intent of a traditional course.

2. Caseload. The total caseload for the GIS using VLE must not exceed 125 students.

3. Progress Monitoring. Services offered by a GIS must be fully described on the student's Written Education Plan (WEP), which must include methods for evaluating progress toward goal attainment and other components outlined in OAC 3301-51-15 (D)(4).

4. Equity of Services. GIS services offered in a district must "ensure equal access to each gifted service for all eligible district students, including minority or disadvantaged students, students with disabilities and students for whom English is a second language" (OAC 3301-51-15 (D)(2)(b). This provision applies to VLE-provided services since all students in a specific grade level must be provided access to the same level of service in each building in the district.

Services Not Provided by a GIS (EMIS coded "205XXX")

1. Quality of Instruction. Gifted and talented students need differentiated curriculum and instruction and support services to fully develop their cognitive, academic, creative and artistic abilities or to excel in a specific content area, including opportunities to exceed grade-level academic indicators and benchmarks. The depth, breadth and pace of instruction, based on the adopted course of study in appropriate content areas, shall be differentiated based on the student's area(s) of identification and individual needs.

2. Student Needs. Gifted services provided within these settings must be differentiated according to each student's needs and fully described in the students' WEP, which includes goals and progress monitoring according to OAC 3301-51-15 (D)(4).

3. Instructor Qualifications. General education teachers who have gifted students clustered in a class receiving service coded as "205XXX" must have a gifted intervention specialist license or receive

high-quality professional development in teaching gifted students, as well as ongoing assistance with curriculum development and instruction from a GIS. Such professional development must conform to the standards outlined by the Ohio Standards Board and be approved by the district gifted coordinator.

Note about Using VLEs Effectively

The use of VLE as an option for providing services to gifted students is a new concept for many districts. When considering the use of this instructional service setting, keep in mind that not all applications that include technology meet the requirements of a VLE. For example, using a computer station to host a webquest or directing students to a commercially available search engine that compiles Internet resources based on student demographics do not constitute a VLE. These popular technology options do have value as an enrichment option in the classroom, but are still considered face-to-face instruction. A VLE, like face-to-face classroom instruction, should encourage experiential, collaborative learning. Consequently, teachers must be able to facilitate active learning and group processes rather than simply provide a place to convey information and content.

A course offered online in which district personnel are not directly responsible for grading or implementing instruction may be considered a VLE, but such courses may fall into the category of Educational Options. The designation Educational Options embodies specific requirements. See Operating Standards for Elementary and Secondary Schools (OAC 3301-35-06 (E-G) for more information.