

## Virtual Transition Project Report.

July 2002



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## **Virtual Transition Project Report**

### **Using Virtual Classrooms and Peer Tutoring to assist the transition of year-6 learners to Senior School.**

#### **1: Introduction:**

In response to the well documented dip in attainment by pupils when they transfer to secondary school, Birmingham Advisory Support Service (BASS) commissioned a local virtual learning project as a research and development initiative within Key Stage 3 Strategy. The aim of the project was to provide year-6 learners from a feeder school with the opportunity to meet with learners from, and find out more about, the secondary school they were due to attend in the Autumn Term.

A further aim was to train a number of learners from year-8 in the receiving school to develop and deliver a 3-week curriculum, in effect to act as virtual peer tutors. These programmes (three in total) were run alongside the new Key Stage 3 Strategy English transition modules.

The project was delivered through a virtual suite of rooms, accessible 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, through any computer with Internet access. This report outlines the project, programme development, virtual delivery and key learning points / considerations, particularly in relation to rolling the programme out to more schools across the City.

The Virtual Transition Project was developed in collaboration with Birmingham Advisory School Service (BASS), Birmingham Grid for Learning (BGfL), Learn Net Advisors & Research, and last but by no means least, Kings Norton School for Girls and Bournville Junior School. The initiative was jointly funded by Bass through the Birmingham Key Stage 3 Strategy and the Birmingham Grid for Learning (BGfL).

#### **2: The Programme:**

The decision to move forward with this programme was delayed by difficulties in engaging a Senior School to work with us on this project. Therefore the time for preparation of staff and peer tutors was limited as we needed a 4 week period for delivery of the pilot programme before the break-up of schools for the summer holiday. It must be acknowledged that in spite of the time limitations and pressures on teachers that are always found at this time of year, both schools rose admirably to the challenge.

The programme was delivered in 3 phases:

- **Phase 1, awareness raising:** We have learnt from previous programmes that in order for e-learning in schools to be successful we need to engage teachers, and make them aware of the issues of being a virtual learner. An awareness raising programme was designed to give teachers and year-8 peer tutors experience of being a virtual learner within the same electronic environment that the year-6 students would be working in. Included in the awareness raising programme were three teachers from both schools, BASS advisors, nine year-8 selected peer tutors, and an observer from another senior school interested in the pilot project. In this programme year-8 peer tutors and teachers worked alongside each other as equals, learning from each other, and facilitated by experienced virtual tutors.

The awareness raising programme commenced week beginning 20<sup>th</sup> May, and, after a face-to-face induction session, continued on-line for three weeks.

- **Phase 2, preparing year-8 students (to be known as peer tutors):** Two 3-hour sessions only were made available for the peer tutors to develop their on-line curriculum and this took place at their school, with their teachers (nine peer tutors and three teachers).

The **first session** was devoted to looking back at how they felt when in year-6 and what their main concerns / expectations were. In addition the peer tutors also looked at what they would have liked to have known before going to senior school. By the end of the session themes had started to emerge and the peer tutors, in groups of 3, had identified what their curriculum would be and had determined the aims and objectives.

During the **second session**, the three proposed programmes were developed further to look at three main activities, to cover 3 weeks of on-line learning. Resources were identified. Aspects of teaching and learning in relation to a collaborative on-line environment were discussed. Each peer tutor took responsibility for one of the activities (preparation and delivery). At the end of the session peer tutors were advised to further the developments and discussion in their own virtual project room.

During phase 2 the teachers worked on their own programme which identified an element of the new literacy transition curriculum and they transferred this into an on-line one-week activity.

- **Phase 3, on-line programme delivery:** The on-line programme for year-6 learners started with an induction on June 12th. (34 learners). They were split into 2 groups and were given several on-line activities to complete in order to give them experience in getting into the virtual suite of rooms, navigating between rooms, opening and closing documents and following a discussion thread. The peer tutors attended the induction so that the year-6 learners could meet them. The induction session lasted approximately 45 minutes each group.

Following the induction session 3 weeks of on-line activities, (facilitated by peer tutors) were made available, finishing with the completion of a confidential evaluation form.

### **3: The year-6 learners:**

Bournville Junior School had 34 learners transferring to Kings Norton Girls School in September. Letters of permission were sent to parents and 32 of the children volunteered to join the project. 2 learners did not want to join in because of feeling that it was too much work on top of a busy term. 2 learners were added in their place because they were appealing for a place at Kings Norton Girls School.

At the induction we asked the learners to complete a registration form. This was to provide us with a base line; a pool of knowledge about the learners. 84% of learners reported having used a computer 'a lot'. This was reflected in the number of learners having access to a computer at home (94%) and Internet access at home (76%), as well as access to a computer suite at school. 100% reported having experiences of finding information on the Internet, 100% reported experience of using Clip Art, 61% in using animations, 49% in using digital photography and 97% in using Paint or similar programmes. All indications were that this was a group of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) competent and experienced learners.

Although experienced users of the Internet only 15% were experienced in using chat-rooms. In addition, surprisingly only 40% said that they would be able to visit the virtual classrooms three times a week even though they had been told this was their commitment and had agreed. However, the question may have been misunderstood.

The question '*What are you most looking forward to in this programme?*' identified a range of responses including learning about the school, teachers and students, talking in the chat rooms, finding lots of new friends, meeting new people. Not many concerns about the programme were expressed except for one person who was worried about '*not being able to remember how to do it*' and one who said '*I don't know about computers*' (a lone voice in a group of experienced ICT users).

Learners were asked to tell us of any concerns regarding transferring to senior school. Out of 55 concerns expressed, the two biggest concerns were about teachers (19) and about homework (16). Questions like '*Are all teachers kind to children?*', '*Want to know which form tutor..., in case we get a horrible and nasty one*' and '*Are the teachers strict?*' were common in this section. For the homework concerns these were about the quantity of homework ('*Is it true that you get 3 hours of homework a night?*') and how hard it was ('*Is homework hard and how many subjects do you get each day?*').

A few concerns were about finding your way around the school and settling in. *'Is it hard to make friends so that you don't look silly if in a class where there is nobody you know?'* wrote one student. *'How long does it take to know your way around the school?'* *'I am worried about being split up from my friends,'* and *'I'm worried about getting lost'* wrote 3 other learners, obviously size of the new school being an issue for some.

Few concerns were expressed about school bullying. Only one learner wrote *'Is there one person in the school who is the school bully?'* and two others asked about the quantity of bullying. **Many of these concerns were dealt with very sensitively by the peer tutors.**

#### **4: Peer Tutors:**

The nine peer tutors were invited to join the project by a teacher at Kings Norton Girls School. They were from a variety of different year-8 student groups and a few had previously attended Bournville Junior School. All of the peer tutors had access to a computer at home and 7 of them had access to the Internet (although all could access the Internet from school). All had experience with ICT, Clip Art and Paint (or similar software). Only one peer tutor had experience with digital photography but eight had experience in Internet chat rooms. Apart from the chat room experience, peer tutors and learners were well matched in terms of access and competence (self-reported).

When asked why they volunteered several reported it was because a teacher had recommended it and it sounded a good idea and fun. One reported that she volunteered because she liked working with computers and message boards.

*'I hope I will benefit from this by being able to use the computer and Internet more easily.'*

Peer tutors were asked how they hoped to personally benefit from the programme. Several talked about gaining more experience and knowledge in the use of ICT. Several reported wanting to get to know new people and one peer tutor identified improving social and listening skills.

*'I think it will teach me a lot about the things we are doing, such as interacting on-line and then having a conversation with other people we may not know.'*

The peer tutors were also asked what they hoped to contribute and several talked about helping other people to learn more about the school and about contributing their knowledge. One person also wrote that she wanted to *'help build and plan this virtual classroom'*. Seven of the nine peer tutors said they were able to visit the virtual classroom three times a week and two said they didn't know.

After the initial on-line awareness raising programme peer tutors were asked to reflect on their experience so far. They were asked to think about what worked well, what problems were encountered, how we can best prepare year-6 learners for their on-line experience and, finally, what makes a good teacher/facilitator in on-line learning.

*'In the virtual reality room I thought it was good because even though we weren't facing the people we could still talk to the people and it isn't like normal e-mail'.*

Only six of the peer tutors completed this reflective task. However, most reported finding the experience fun, but thought some of the tasks were hard to follow. One comment was made about the lack of colour in the virtual rooms, and this was later reflected in the evaluation comments of year-6 learners. Finally here are some comments which sum up their thoughts on teaching and learning on-line.

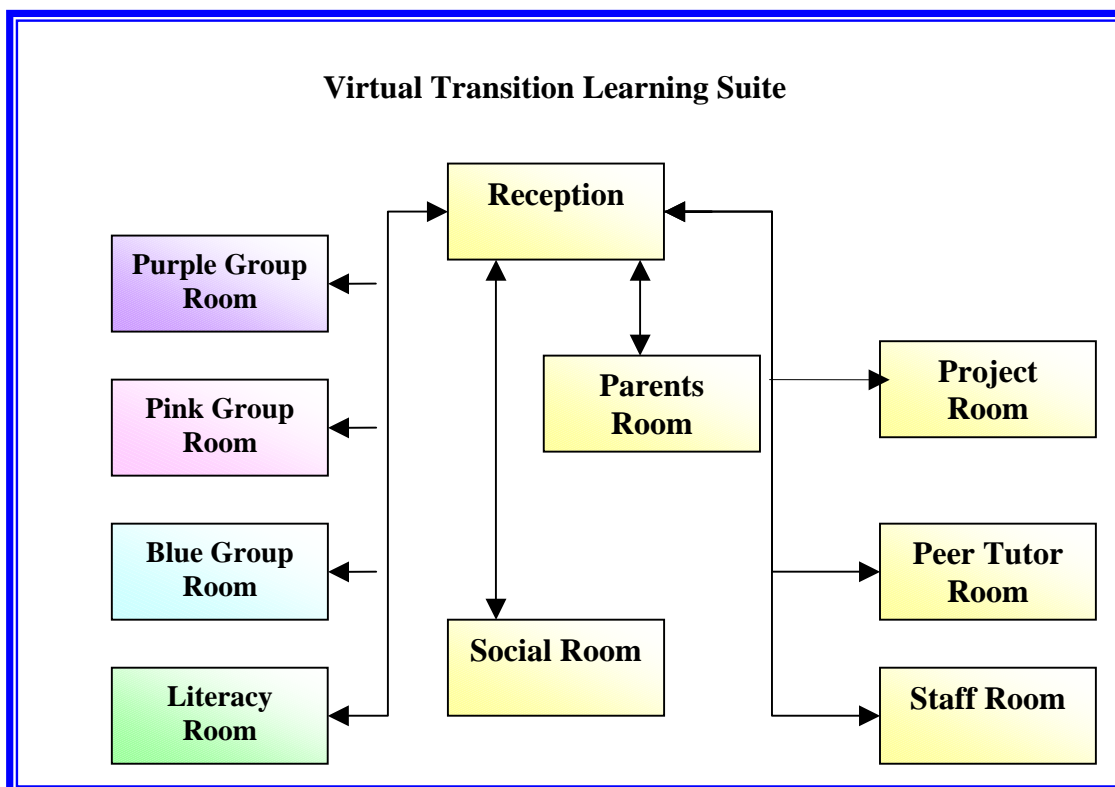
*'I think that once they (year-6 learners) have been on a few times and get used to what they have to do then they will find it easy to come to chat to us. If they do have problems then we will try our hardest to solve them and to make sure that they will come to secondary school it will be in easy to understand stages and not one giant leap'.*

*To prepare the year-6 students we need to just take our time and when on-line with the girls from year-6 we need to be ourselves and tell them all they need to know about switching schools. I think that what makes a good teacher is someone who does not put on an act to sound all big and in charge. All we need to do is imagine we were still in year-6 and just about to move to KNGS and remember what was on our minds at the time. They are feeling the same way we did when we were in year 6, so we should make great on-line teachers because we know how they feel'.*

*'I think what makes a good on-line teacher is making things simple and explaining things in full and making things easy and fun.'*

## **5: The virtual learning environment.**

The virtual learning suite was built using Lotus Notes and was designed to accommodate learners, peer tutors, other staff and parents. This was an access controlled and tiered system enabling privacy and security for groups within the programme. Entry to the virtual learning suite was via an Internet connection, from any computer and at any time, into a virtual reception area. Every virtual room could be accessed via the reception area (access control permitting). The virtual rooms were built using standard templates designed for the Birmingham Grid for Learning.



- **Virtual Classrooms:** The virtual classrooms were built for collaborative learning, recognising that learners bring with them, skills, knowledge and experiences that can be shared. We were looking to facilitate group discussion within a social learning environment. A decision was made to divide these learners into 3 groups on the basis that 11/12 in a group would be a manageable number given the intensity of this type of learning.
  - **Pink Group Room:** This room was for Pink Group members and their peer tutors only. The programme was about **Teachers** and the aim was to make year-6 students feel comfortable around teachers and give an idea about how and what teachers teach.
  - **Purple Group:** This room was restricted to Purple Group members and their peer tutors only. This programme was about **How to Survive School Life** and the aim was to give learners an idea about school life, to calm fears and to make the first half term easier.
  - **Blue Group:** This room was restricted to Blue Group members and their peer tutors only. This programme was about **New School Life** and was designed to find out what learners favourite subjects were now and if these were going to be the same at Senior School, what learners were most looking forward to at senior school and what were the 3 most common fears. This programme was then designed to fully

encompass collaborative learning, requiring group decision making in 2 of the 3 activities.

- **Literacy Room:** This was an activity run by teachers at Kings Norton Girls School. Each group was invited in for a week at a time with the aim of learners writing a poem about their feelings.
- **Project Room:** Used for the awareness raising programme in phase 1 by staff, observers and peer tutors.
- **Virtual Social Room:** The virtual social room was designed to enable learners and peer tutors to meet socially. No adults used this area although learners and peer tutors were aware that it was being observed by the project co-ordinator and that intervention would occur if anything was amiss (no such intervention was necessary). Users of this area could create their own categories and threaded discussion, organising this environment as appropriate to their needs.
- **Virtual Peer Tutor Room:** Primarily for use by peer tutors and the project co-ordinator, but accessible by other staff supporting curriculum development and delivery.
- **Staff Room:** Restricted to use by adults involved in the project / development.
- **Parents Room:** This was open access and was made available to parents wishing to find out more about the project. Only one parent visited this area.

Security was built on several levels. Open access to anyone visiting the virtual reception area and parents room. Other virtual rooms were access controlled by user group. Within each virtual room, roles were assigned to users to enable security at document level e.g. confidential documents used on occasions such as About Me document and Evaluation.

## The Virtual Transition Reception Area



### 6: Attendances:

In Phase three, from induction to close of the programme there were 414 visits to the virtual classrooms. 76% of these visits were made by learners and 24% by peer tutors. Given that 76% of learners had Internet access at home, only 30% of attendances were made outside school hours with the greatest proportion of attendances being made at lunch time in school. However, the peer tutors (78% had Internet access from home) made 61% of attendances before school, in the evening and at weekends. Some time was given to them to work in school hours and so 19% of the attendances were made during morning periods at school and a further 20% during lunch periods. This shows the level of commitment given by many of the peer tutors to the programme.

There appears to be an even spread of attendances through the three weeks, although there was a slight dip in week two which corrected itself in week three, the week of the induction for all students transferring to Kings Norton Girls School.

**Table 1: Virtual classroom attendances, sorted by Group**

	<b>Pink Group</b>	<b>Purple Group</b>	<b>Blue Group</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Student visits</b>	90	43	72	316 (76%)
<b>Tutor visits</b>	32	35	7	98 (24%)
<b>Ratio student to tutors visits</b>	3:1	1.1:1	10.1	3:1

There were differences seen in attendances by group (Table 1). This is interesting data given that the blue group never put any activities in during the 3 weeks (other than the induction activities) because, although they had a detailed curriculum and collaborative tasks mapped out, communications difficulties resulted in no activities being submitted. The purple group were also slow to put in their first activity possibly resulting in lost interest of some learners.

Numbers of attendances, however, doesn't demonstrate the level of activity by the learners and peer tutors. Table 2 sorts the number of entries made by group. This shows that following induction only 22 learners (65%) were active in the virtual classrooms, with several of these contributing up to 20 entries during the 3 weeks while others completed the bare minimum. Even in the classroom where no activities following induction were posted there were learners contributing up to 17 messages, and an average of 7 postings per learner.

Further to this data, we have in the 3 virtual classrooms a record of documents opened a staggering **8,321** times (a small proportion of this can be accounted for by monitoring and observation). This demonstrates that learners and peer tutors were very active in reading and searching for new entries and responses.

**Table 2: Number of entries made in the virtual classrooms.**

	<b>Pink Group</b>	<b>Purple Group</b>	<b>Blue Group</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Learners</b>				
<b>No. learners</b>	11	11	12	34
<b>No. Active after induction</b>	8	7	7	22
<b>No. entries</b>	133 (74%)	62 (68%)	80 (82%)	275 (75%)
<b>Range</b>	1 - 20	1 - 11	2 - 17	1 - 20
<b>Average No. entries (all learners)</b>	12	6	7	8
<b>Peer Tutors</b>				
<b>No. peer tutors</b>	3	3	3	9
<b>No. Active</b>	3	3	3	9
<b>No. entries</b>	46 (26%)	30 (22%)	17 (18%)	93 (25%)
<b>Range</b>	8 - 22	5 - 20	4 - 8	4 - 22
<b>Average No. entries</b>	15	10	6	10

The Social Room had 88 visits from 19 learners, and 24 visits from 7 peer tutors. The learners posted 195 (88%) messages and tutors posted 26 (12%) messages. The range of message posted by all was from 1 to 27 with an average of 8.5 messages each.

### The Virtual Social Room for Learners and Peer Tutors.

Search Main Doc Hide All Show All Page Up Page Down

**grid**  
Virtual Social Room

**Welcome to the Social Room**

**Ruth Garner**  
You are now in the Category view on the 07/29/2002 at 01:35 PM

**Open All Hours**

This week's specials  
Steak and Chips  
Vegetarian Delight  
Chicken Curry  
Jean Rolly Polly  
Treacle Tart  
Served with a drink of your choice

Reception

- ▶ A Hint!
- ▶ A welcome message
- ▶ anything
- ▶ Does anyone...
- ▶ Hello
- ▶ Hi
- ▶ how should i know i'm only 10
- ▶ I'm goin' off line now.
- ▶ Is this working?
- ▶ music

## **7: Learner feedback:**

Of the 34 learners registered on the programme, 22 of these were actively engaged in the programmes, but only 14 (42%) completed the feedback forms at the end of week 3. Of those who responded 43% reported having enjoyed working in virtual classrooms a lot and no one reported not enjoying it at all. When looked at by groups, 100% of the blue group learners reported enjoying working in virtual classrooms 'a little' and this could be a reflection of the lack of activities for this group. It was reported that the best thing about the programme was activities and social room (29%), chatting to girls at Kings Norton Girls School (21%), Learning about the school 21%), everything (7%)

57% reported having completed all or most of the activities, and 92% felt that the activities were useful in finding out more about Kings Norton Girls School, whilst only 8% reported that they didn't find them useful at all. When asked if there was anything else they would have liked to find out about 64% said there was nothing. When asked what could have been better, 14% of the respondents said the activities could have been more interesting, 21% felt that the response to their questions could have been better (sometimes they didn't get a reply). 14% would have liked the peer tutors on-line with them at the same time. 29% said that there wasn't anything that needed improving. Other comments mentioned lack of colour in the virtual rooms. Comment on the use of the word 'virtual' (disappointed it wasn't virtual reality) and lack of games.

64% also reported that they felt better about starting a new school (including 75% of the blue group respondents), and a further 28% reported feeling a 'little' better about this.

42% of the respondents would like to do more programmes like this, 50% couldn't make their minds up and no-one reported not wanting to do anything like this again. 29% of learners felt that they had learnt new skills (mostly communication and keyboard skills) and 14% said they had learnt none. The rest were undecided. The 14% who said they had learnt no new skills were made up from respondents from the Pink Group which had the technically most challenging activity (drawing a picture in Paint or similar programme and uploading, which only one learner completed).

The social room was identified as 'fun' by 57% of the respondents and 'fun and useful' by a further 7%. The rest didn't respond to this question and this could have been, to some extent, due to some of the respondents not having used the social room.

## **8: Key considerations or learning points:**

This has been a multifaceted and ambitious project which has encompassed year 6/7 transition issues, peer tutoring, virtual learning, environmental design and out-of-hours learning. What we have gained from this project, apart from the identified benefits to learners, provides a rich source of information which adds to our growing knowledge of e-learning, peer tutoring and year 6/7 transition. Key learning points, or issues which we would give greater consideration to if or when the programme is rolled out include:

### **8.1: Timeliness and timelines:**

- This project was delayed because of the difficulties experienced in engaging a senior school to work within the project. This created several difficulties including not having sufficient notice to programme in project management time for teachers, having to run phase 1 and 2 alongside each other, and insufficient time to prepare the peer tutors.
- In addition, the timeliness of the project was right as the programme was delivered in the last half-term of the school year when leavers would generally start to think about moving on. But the main programme followed SATs and could have been perceived by some as 'more work' and, indeed, was sited as the reason for 2 learners not joining the programme.

*Key consideration:* To engage schools earlier in the academic year for awareness raising, training of peer tutors and curriculum/resource development.

### **8.2: Peer Tutors:**

- 78% of the peer tutors had Internet access at home and thus were able to make 61% of their visits to the virtual classrooms in the evening and at weekends.

*Key consideration:* If such access isn't available in future programmes this may have an impact on support given to year-6 learners.

- Peer tutors only had 2 sessions to prepare them for developing and delivering a curriculum on-line. The peer tutors rose to the challenge and developed 3 very good programmes as described previously. These matched the common fears identified by the learners, demonstrating that the peer tutors had been able to appropriately reflect and learn from their own experiences during the transition phase. In addition this could be an indicator that these fears are common throughout the years within this local community.

*Key consideration:* Are the common fears reflective of all children across the wider community or are they influenced by economic, cultural, or social factors?

- A further session would have supported resource design and made sure activities and materials were ready prior to commencement of the programme. During the programme there was confusion about who was responsible for putting in activities, and resources requiring programming were received late. This resulted in some activities being posted late or not posted at all.

*Key consideration:* The use of communication systems need to be encouraged. The virtual curriculum development room was built as the main management and support facility for peer tutors and yet this was hardly visited making it difficult for the project co-ordinator to discuss strategies, timing or tutoring issues.

*Key consideration:* Roles and responsibilities need clearly defining.

- Some interesting activities were developed including an interactive form which gave scenarios about situations in school and asked for an action and reason for response from the learners. Another activity gave links to descriptions of individual teachers and asked learners to identify who they liked the most and why. Another activity which was never posted asked learners to discuss their fears re moving to senior school and to agree the 3 most common. The curriculum and the activities / resources could easily be replicated and or adapted for other groups.

*Key consideration:* Who owns the curriculum? How can it be made widely available? Do peer tutors need to go through the process of reflection in order to be empathetic in their delivery or in order to take ownership of the programme, for best effect?

- Peer tutors had natural, caring and responsible approaches to learners. They were never patronising neither did they assert their role as group facilitators at any time. When they answered a question they always ended with another question to keep the discussion open and invite further comments. They always placed a signature at the end of a message indicating who they were. Peer tutors used the social room as an extension of the classroom inviting questions, answering questions, inviting feedback and on one occasion nudging learners into the classroom to complete an activity (*Hey this is S.... from the purple group. Is there anyone who hasn't done activity 1? If you haven't please could you do it as soon as possible?*)

Only on one occasion was there a need to intervene between two users who were a little abusive to one another. The tutor wrote 'OK u2 no bad language

*this is a calm common room so be nice!!!* This was met with positive responses from the 2 learners concerned.

Example of a tutor response in the common room:

*'Hello K....*

*We have a drama club in year 7 and you do drama as a lesson when you are in year 8.*

*We don't go swimming with the school but that should not stop you from doing it in your own time.*

*I like eating to that is one of my fave things to do.*

*We have a choir so you can sing and you can also have a go at entering in the talent shows we have every now and again you may even win.*

*I hope you enjoy KNGs'*

*Key consideration:* How much training is required for peer tutors? Can we over train and stilt their natural ability to support their peers? When 75% of the blue group respondents reported feeling better about going to senior school how much importance should we place on curriculum and how much should we place just in opportunities to interact with one another?

### **8.3: Opportunities to meet peers from other feeder schools:**

- Within the social room there was a lot of discussion about best friends, favourite music, holidays and leisure activities, but all on a superficial level. There were lots of requests for someone to talk to and when one learner wrote *'Does anyone want to talk to me?' a reply was 'I can talk to you face-to-face'*. Learners clearly enjoyed visiting this area (*'2 s... how u doin now this is cool e-mailin each other isn't it thanx for the message! Luv from ur bf e...'*). However, if there had been more feeder schools within the project there would have been the added benefit of getting to know some of their peers prior to starting at the school in September.

*Key Consideration:* During role-out of the programme to actively engage more than one feeder school per programme

### **8.4: Communication:**

- During phase 3 the virtual staff room and virtual peer tutor room were designed as the main communication system. The purpose of these rooms included:
  - Transparency of management and development.

- Archived record of decision making, observations, problems and solutions etc.
- Feedback from teaching staff.
- Support and/or mentoring for peer tutors.

However, these rooms were rarely used creating greater reliance on email and, where this didn't work, telephone communication. Thus the greatest level of communication occurred between the project co-ordinator and the lead teacher at Kings Norton Girls, who took on a significant role (in terms of responsibility and time) for communicating with the peer tutors.

*Key consideration:* Key staff from each organisation involved in any on-line project, and peer tutors, need to be confident in the use of virtual staff rooms and there needs to be clarity of expectations regarding the use of this facility.

### **8.5: Equalising opportunities.**

- The virtual classroom equalises opportunities for people and removes barriers of disability, ethnicity, gender, age etc. For those who find it difficult to speak or be heard in a face-to-face group situation, virtual classrooms offer people the time they need to think about a question or a posting and respond in a much more thoughtful way. Thus people can feel a lot more confident in the contribution they make to group decision making, learning and/or communication.

Significant barriers that also need to be broken down are those between adults/children and teachers/learners. In phase 1 the peer tutors worked alongside adults in learning how to use a virtual classroom. Peer tutors were equal partners in the awareness raising and had equal skills, knowledge and experiences to contribute to the discussions/activities. In some instances peer tutors had a greater level of ICT skills than the adults on the programme and, naturally, the peer tutors had more recent experiential learning of year-6/7 transition.

One learning point for some of us was when peer tutors reported that they couldn't upload a file to the virtual classrooms that they had created using Paint. They were asked to wait until their virtual tutors were in school and they would help them to do this. What the tutors found when they arrived at the school was that peer tutors didn't have authorisation to upload files to an internet facility, and while teachers did have this authorisation, they didn't have authorisation to use the Paint software.

*Key consideration:* When peer tutors (young learners) report a technical problem we accept this rather than assume they haven't the skills. This is, after all, an area where children are becoming increasingly confident, skilful and expert due to exposure/use of ICT both at home and at school.

*Key consideration:* The virtual classroom is designed for access from home, from equipment commonly found in high street stores. Levels of authorisation for learners from school networks need to be checked so that the on-line curriculum works within, or can accommodate local restrictions.

Teachers, managers, observers were asked how they wanted themselves identified, given that some teachers would be working alongside their own learners. Did they want their first names shown on documents or simply the title by which they were known in school? Most adults wanted to be known by their first names which helped to remove a visual barrier to equality for the peer tutors. It also helped to differentiate the 'virtual' classroom (led by facilitators) from the 'traditional' classroom (led by teachers).

*Key consideration:* A standard for the use of names within programmes should be determined if we are to embrace the ethos of virtual learning (equality, removing barriers presented by 'titles' etc.). However, on some occasions it was difficult to identify the peer tutors. These need to be made more visible, particularly if more than one feeder school is involved, and this could be sensitively achieved by using something like 'Pink Emily', denoting group rather than highlighting status e.g. 'Tutor Emily'.

#### **8.6: Learning environment:**

- The learners were very quick to learn how to use the virtual environment: all received a short 45 minute induction in which they were expected to navigate between rooms, fill out an 'About Me' form, open documents and respond. During the programme learners were following threaded discussions and joining in these. Some learners were looking for 'real-time' or synchronous 'chat' opportunities (asking if anyone was on-line when they were), although this wasn't highlighted as a problem during evaluation. One problem highlighted by a few learners and a few peer tutors was the lack of colour in the virtual environment. No strategies were put in place by learners or peer tutors to counteract this, such as uploading colourful pictures or files of other types. A few more games were requested by some learners and this could have been accommodated in the social area.

*Key Consideration:* Explore the virtual social room design with peer tutors / year-6 children to see if this can accommodate what learners want (more colour, more games, more safe links to other sites etc.).

### The Virtual Classroom – Pink Group

The screenshot shows a web browser window with a navigation bar at the top containing buttons for 'Hide All', 'Main Doc.', 'Evaluation', 'Private', 'Show All', 'Page Up', and 'Page Down'. The main content area features a logo for 'grid Virtual Classroom' on the left. Below the logo is a 'Folders' section with a green header and a list of folders: 'Induction', 'Activity 1', 'Activity 2', 'Activity 3', and 'Miscellaneous'. A blue 'Reception' button is located below the folders. The main text area is titled 'The Pink Room: Getting to know the Teachers' and includes a sub-header 'Ruth Garner'. Below this, it states 'You are now in the Information view on the 07/29/2002 at 01:33 PM'. A red horizontal line separates the header from the message content. The message, dated '07/09/2002', reads: 'Hi everyone. Well thank you for joining in the Virtual Transition programme. We are drawing to a close now but would really welcome your comments on the programme so that when we run it again we can make it even better! Please click on the Evaluation button above and send and fill the form in. This is a private form. Good luck to everyone in your new school - I am sure you will have a great time and be very successful. Best wishes, Ruth'. Below the message, there is a partial message dated '07/01/2002' that says 'Hello everyone.' followed by a vertical bar. A mouse cursor is visible near the bottom right of the message area.

## 9: Summary.

This has been a very successful and enjoyable project and one which has achieved its aims of:

- Year-6 learners reported that they found out more about the school they are moving to in the new academic year and reported feeling better about this transfer.
- Nine peer tutors have been trained and have successfully developed three programmes aimed at supporting transition.
- Awareness-raising programme, peer-tutor training programme and 4 transition programmes have been developed during the programme. With the exception of the **New School Life** programme, all have been piloted.
- The transition programmes (each 3-weeks long) were delivered through a virtual suite of rooms specially designed for the purpose, using the Birmingham Grid for Learning (BGfL) templates. This allowed access from any computer with internet access 24-hours a day, 7-days a week.

Two schools have been actively engaged in this pilot project and these are Kings Norton Girls School (secondary) and Bournville Junior School (primary feeder school). Out of the 34 learners, 76% had access from home and 30% of the visits to the virtual suite of rooms were made out of school hours, with the greatest proportion of visits being made from school during the lunch period.

The nine peer tutors (year-8 students) made 61% of their visits outside school hours demonstrating a significant level of commitment from this group (and their families for allowing them to take part from home). 78% of peer tutors had Internet access at home and without this they would have had to have had regular periods built into their school day to be able to carry out their duties as facilitators. This has implications for any roll-out of this programme across the City, particularly as the levels of access seen in this programme are likely to be the exception rather than the rule.

No abuse has been made of this system or programme by learners and the delivery and monitoring has been the responsibility of peer tutors. The peer tutors have demonstrated a natural ability to respond appropriately and sensitively to their learners and have adopted a style which promotes further discussion and opportunities to share more concerns or queries. These are now experienced virtual tutors who could act as mentors to others new to virtual peer tutoring, or who could be used to co-facilitate awareness raising programmes for teachers, students and others wishing to find out more about on-line learning.

## **10: Acknowledgements.**

The project was only possible because of the enthusiasm, direction and participation of a group of key staff. This project fell at a busy time in the academic year, when unscheduled activities are hard to accommodate. We recognise the pressures placed upon both schools in order to participate and without their active engagement this project would not have been possible. Many thanks go to:

- Brian Wardle, Birmingham Advisory Support Service,
- Jane Langfield, Birmingham Grid for Learning,
- Penny Manford, Birmingham Advisory Support Service,
- Keith Edwards, Birmingham Grid for Learning,
- Julia Lea, Kings Norton Girls School,
- Samantha Banner, Kings Norton Girls School,
- Alison Lee, Kings Norton Girls School,
- Sue Barratt, Bournville Junior School,
- Anne Henson, Bournville Junior School,
- S Manning, Bournville Junior School,
- Iain Eglinton, Selly Park Technology College,
- Ruth Garner, Learn Net Advisors & Research.

A special thanks goes to the Peer Tutors (year-8 pupils), Kings Norton Girls School, for all their hard work and significant contribution to this innovative project. Without the application of their skills, knowledge and experience this project would not have been easy to develop, deliver and manage. We would also like to thank their parents/carers for allowing them to work from home.

Finally, we would like to thank all the year-6 learners for agreeing to enter this programme and contributing to our growing foundation knowledge of e-learning applications and the needs of learners progressing to a new school / year-7. We also would like to thank their parents / carers for allowing learners to access the virtual transition programme from home.