School Portrait: Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium
by Paavo Viilup, Centre of Educational Technology, Tallinn Pedagogical University

The following school portrait will provide an overview of the only Comenius school in Viljandi. Special attention will be given to available ICT resources and their use in the school’s Comenius project, but a general overview if ICT use will also be given.

Overview and history

Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium is located in Viljandi, a small town of 20 000 in Southern Estonia. The school has approximately 1 017 students (data from 10 September 2003), who are taught by 66 teachers. The school was originally a boarding school (established in 1965 and called Viljandi Boarding School, the current name dates from 1995, but from 1973-1995 the school was called Viljandi Secondary School No. 5), but now the boarding house is used by the elementary school, whereas the original school building is used by the primary and secondary schools. Special attention is paid to teaching German and music, but in secondary school all students can also choose whether to focus on humanities or science. There are also a number of organisations and clubs (e. g. a number of choirs and sports clubs) which provide extracurricular activities for the school’s students.

ICT resources

At the moment, Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium has the following ICT resources:

- 1 computer lab with 16 computers (Pentium 166) from 1998 (funded by the Phare foundation)
• 1 computer lab with 16 computers (Celeron ???) from 2003 (leased by the school)
• 2 portable multimedia projectors
• laptops for teachers
• computers for teachers and the administration
• 1 server running the Intranet and the school’s webpage

The aforementioned webpage (located at http://www.vpg.vil.ee and created by an external web design company) is administered and updated by the ICT coordinator/teacher. In order to update the webpage with information relevant to their courses, teachers have to send this information to the ICT coordinator (via e-mail) and the information will then appear under the appropriate section on the school webpage. While the webpage itself does not have any forums or discussion boards, certain forms (e. g. 11B and 10A) have their own websites, some of which have, among other things, discussion forums for the students and teachers of the form.

At the current time, ICT is taught to forms 4, 7, 10, and 11. The number of lessons per week varies from form to form, but already the teaching of ICT provides the students with sufficient guidance in new technologies and basic ICT concepts. In addition, many teachers use the computer laboratories for teaching various subjects (English is the most prominent one, but biology, mathematics, and arts are also taught using the available ICT resources). Students also have access to the two computer labs after all official lessons are over.

The best example of ICT use in lessons within Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium is an English course, which takes place completely in a computer lab. The author of the course is Mart Reitel, English teacher and also the school’s Comenius contact.

Comenius project: Flexible student grouping: an effective way of solving educational problems

The project "Flexible Grouping - An Efficient Way To Solve Educational Problems" developed by I.E.S. Jose Conde Garcia (Almansa, Spain), Viljandi Paalalinna
Gümnaasium (Viljandi, Estonia), Klaukkalan Yläaste (Klaukkala, Finland), Istituto Magistrale “A. Cairoli” (Pavia, Italy) and Colegiul Tehnic “Traian Vuia” Galati (Galati, Romania) is aimed to research the history of students' groupings in different countries, the present situation in the area and possibilities of implementation of the experience received at the group meetings in everyday school life. The main goal of this project is to study the best ways in which students should be grouped so as to improve their results and their involvement in school and social life.

The aims of the project are outlined as follows:

- to improve the organisation of grouping students in the school
- to avoid conflicts and other bad phenomena (stress, drugs, alcohol) in the school
- to compare grouping methods in different countries in order to implement the best solutions in the school
- to raise students’ interest in acquiring knowledge
- to influence trends in changing the educational system
- to improve self-esteem and common teenagers problems through satisfactory groups

The expected effects are outlined as follows:

- improvement of students’ results in studying
- raising teachers’ knowledge on proper handling groups of students
- improvement of students’ mental health in the school
- educating teachers, parents on how to help solve teenagers’ problems

The usage of information and communication technologies is outlined in the project plan as follows:

- Internet – email, website, discussion forum
- traditional and cellular phone
- fax
Project Activities

Up to now (the project has lasted for one year) all member schools have carried out a research project on school violence (in the form of questionnaire) and the research results from the individual schools were combined into one during a meeting in ???, where the students collaborated on a joint report.

The related questionnaires and other materials are available for interested parties at the project’s website (located at http://www.vpg.vil.ee/~comenius1/)

ICT Use in the Context of the School’s Comenius Project

As is outlined in the project guidelines, communication between the member schools takes place by using both old and new technologies. E-mail is used extensively, which is to be expected, but the project also has a very informative website, which contains much relevant information and is updated with at least some frequency. The website also has a forum, which is used in addition to e-mail to discuss the ideas and issues surrounding the project. The advantage of this is that the discussions are also available for the general public, which in the case of most e-mails is, of course, not the case unless somebody collects all the e-mails and puts them online. The forum does not have a very high posting rate, but the posts are generally to the point and there is no digital debris.

Computer-based synchronous communication methods are not used to manage the project or discuss matters. This is largely due to the lack of technical readiness (this is especially the case with video conferencing) and lack of resources to acquire the necessary equipment. Working on the aforementioned research done by the students would have most likely been more effective if computer-based synchronous communication had been used (in reality, collaboration took place during the meeting in Pavia), but all the member schools lacked either the technical readiness or were generally hesitant to get involved in trying out synchronous computer-mediated communication. But asynchronous methods are used widely and successfully and the forum is a highly effective inclusion.
Other projects

Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium was also involved in another very successful project, the ?????. The school managed to win the competition, together with partner schools (from Poland and Croatia), twice and was second once. The websites created during this project (or rather many small projects, the last one of which you can at http://www.vpg.vil.ee/~pippi/) are truly impressive and use, for example, Flash animations and interactive quizzes to present the subject-matter, which is related to history and finding differences and similarities in the histories of the countries the partnered schools are from.

Conclusion

Viljandi Paalalinna Gümnaasium has been extremely successful in both ICT implementation and project involvement. The school has gained an enormous amount of experience from the lengthy period of involvement in various European projects and this experience is also currently in use. In addition, the school has also proven to be a trustworthy partner for the other project participants. It can only be hoped that the school’s past success will be repeated in future projects.