

Experience of a lifetime



Abbotsleigh students participate in valuable Online School for Girls program

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Year 11 student

Being part of the Online School for Girls community has been an amazing experience that I know I'll cherish for the rest of my life. The opportunities have been amazing and the amount of information and ways to access, communicate and demonstrate this information has really opened my view on the wider world. Technology is often condemned as being a means of

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distraction in education, but the attractive nature of the course and the excitement whenever I log on has made me realise that there is in fact a huge amount of interesting material on the internet which can substitute my slightly useless forms of entertainment.

This experience allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the online platform and I've learnt a variety of online tools to use in the future. To date, we have had three separate units of work, a debate and a six week assignment.

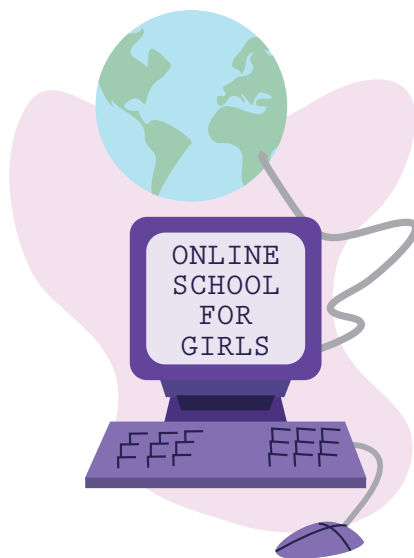
What information sources did we use?

There was a good range of sources we used. There was an array of websites that we were exposed to through the teacher. During independent tasks, we were required to look into other sources, such as briefing papers, videos, e-newspapers and other websites.

What Web 2.0 tools did we use?

We were exposed to a lot of internet tools, many of which we had never used before. They were always different, depending on the course. For instance, in my course, a good range of tools was used because we were constantly required to provide opinions and reflect our understanding of a specific topic. Some of the tools were:

- HAIKU – a tool we used to organise our classes
- Diigo.com – a bookmarking tool that enables you to look into other sources linking to a URL
- Voicethread – allows you to record a message (voice). It's a good break from typing all the time!
- Google Reader – this allows you to subscribe to different websites and be up-to-date with what they put up daily (RSS feed)
- Wikispaces – This was extremely useful for our group debate, in which we all provided information collaboratively, from two different continents!



Unit 1 – The 21st Century world

This was a course which was a bit of a mix of economics and geography, with a tinge of history. It really allowed us to compile ideas and encouraged us to look at things from a factual perspective, rather than from an obvious perspective. For instance, most people assume that aid is good for developing countries. However, what the public misses out on is what these charities do with the money, how much money goes to the CEOs, etc. It also allowed us to investigate how trade was linked to human rights, the effects of globalisation, and the controversy surrounding the World Bank and IMF. We were often asked to answer questions,

provide an opinion and to think creatively, which from my perspective is very appealing, as it doesn't just focus on our academic ability – but rather stimulates our creative minds as well.

Unit 2 – Economic development

This was a very rigorous part of the course. I had a bit of difficulty understanding it because so many of the definitions were part of Year 11 and 12 Economics and Geography. This was the same for Unit 1. This disadvantage wasn't too bad, but it did mean that I had to look up definitions occasionally. This unit provided many case studies, which really allowed us to look into the outer world and become familiar with what happens in developing countries. We are often only exposed to what the media manipulates for us, so the course was very useful in providing first hand news.

Debate – Fair trade or free trade?

The class debate we did was very entertaining and fun, considering that we don't often get to communicate with the other students because of the time difference. Although it was a little last minute for our group, it was nevertheless very interesting to find out more about my fellow students via Skype. It was a good piece of independent work and allowed us to develop our research skills. I can understand why this course is done on the internet, because so much of it is updated constantly, so the production of books would slow down the process.

The debate involved several different topics, which were listed on the left hand side of the webpage. There were about three different boxes on each

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debate topic page. They were boxes that we could add onto the Wikispaces which could contain text, images or videos, so long as they linked to the topic of that Wikispaces, which in one case was 'should new trade agreements include labour and

environmental standards?'. On that page, our team had images, a case study and a paragraph containing our team's views.

What was difficult about it?

The biggest challenge from my perspective was the demands of the course. Although I was aware it was going to be challenging, I didn't think that it would be to a degree that would require up to 10 assignments due each week. It was extremely rigorous, especially during the first couple of weeks. There was just so much due every Wednesday and Sunday.

The amount of time needed for the assignments was a little unrealistic. Whilst talking to some of my other classmates, I found that many of them were able to spend class time on the project. In my case though, there was barely any time, especially on top of co-curricular sports and school duties too. However, later in the course, the workload did lessen, so that was much better for me.

There were also some technical issues at times, but the teacher was very understanding and allowed extensions. One suggestion, was an e-book to store all our work in, just in case the site crashed. While this didn't happen this time, it was convenient to have a copy somewhere (e.g. Word or OneNote).

In terms of difficulty, I think the only main concern is the ability for the students to digest and follow all the information being thrown at us. It is quite a challenging course academically, so students have to be on top of the game at all times.

The material you learn is interlinked with Year 11 and 12 subjects, especially with Economics, Geography and at times History. There is so much information weekly, so students have to have the capability to balance it all and hand in the work on time. Some assignments can be just too difficult to understand. My teacher was very helpful though, as he replied to emails very quickly or was available on Skype any time.

What am I doing now?

I have now completed a third unit of the course, which is titled 'global women's issues' – a unit, I believe, that has shaped the way I look at women immensely. So much of the unit was engrossing and so emotionally involving too.

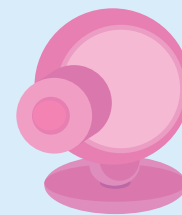
We had to do a short report on a chapter we read in the book, *Half the Sky*, which looks at the lack of women's rights around the world, as well as proving how 'women aren't the problem, but the solution'.

As I think about it, I can't help but feel a little sad because OSG was such a large part of my life in 2010. It has been full of ups and downs but more importantly, was a great experience for me that has provided invaluable lessons for my future.

Reflections from the program

Farida Nurlanova and Zara Gough

Year 11



What course did you take?

Farida: I took the Genetics Fall course.

Zara: Genetics

What did the course require you to do?

Farida: The course required us to learn a unit of new material relating to different areas of genetics each week, and then we were required to submit assignments which demonstrated our knowledge of the unit.

Zara: Each week the work involved completing a vocab list where we had to write definitions and examples for new words used in the unit. There was also a weekly assignment of study questions, which were mostly problem solving questions that were relevant to the unit's work. Each week there was a discussion topic, to which we had to post a response. At the end of each unit, there was a short test, as well as longer exams from time to time and occasional group projects.

How many hours each week did you spend on the course?

Farida: I spent about 10 hours a week doing this course.

How many weeks were involved in the course?

Zara: The course ran for about 12 weeks.

What forms did the communication take?

Zara: There were many forms of communication. The Online School website had a messaging tool for communication, which was helpful, and we were also able to talk to our teacher and other students through Skype. There were also discussion boards (similar to a blog) which allowed us to speak to others.

Was there any sharing of work with other students or the facilitator?

Zara: Yes, a lot of our work was done collaboratively or published on the class site for other students to see. Some examples of this was an assignment where we had to create a video to teach the rest of the class, and our final assignment where we picked a topic and created a website for it which was then published to the rest of the class and we all had to comment.

How enjoyable was the learning?

Farida: I really enjoyed gaining a greater knowledge of genetics throughout the course; however, this was at times affected by the huge amounts of work set every week and the fast pace at which we were supposed to complete tasks. At times, I felt learning in the course was very rushed.

Zara: I found the learning really enjoyable. It was a different style of learning to have a class fully online but I really enjoyed the experience.

What needed to be improved or would have made it better for you?

Farida: I think that time constraints was the main issue I had with the course. I found most of the work quite intellectually taxing and as there was usually a lot of it every week, I often didn't have time to complete the work or fully understand the concepts that were taught. Extending the time frame of the course could make it easier to spread out the distribution of work and students could benefit from more time to learn the material and do the work.

What was the best part of the course?

Farida: The best part of the course for me was the global communication it provided with other students and the instructor of the course. I enjoyed engaging in the frequent discussions which occurred as well as the collaboration of work and ideas. This was really a strong factor in sustaining my interest in the course.

Our students were sponsored by the Alliance Girls School as part of a pilot research project.