

A Quick Guide to Virginia's Community of Learning: Its Use and Support

By Harley Miles

Virginia's Community of Learning (VCOL) offers preservice, inservice, and postservice educators, as well as those who simply have an interest in education and learning, a comprehensive collection of resources that span educational endeavor. The VCOL site (www.virginialearning.org) provides quick reference within four focused neighborhoods: Classrooms, Technologies, Professional Development, and Resources.

The Classrooms neighborhood encompasses all areas of the curriculum from core to crucial. The Technologies neighborhood provides insight into emerging applications and devices while also providing support for the extant technology environment. The Professional Development neighborhood covers the gamut from certification to retirement. The Resources neighborhood catalogues general resources for those interested in broad areas of education and learning. While the universe of the site is comprehensive, maneuvering through and to its content information is not difficult.

Anatomy of the VCOL Homepage

The VCOL community structure allows for both quick, direct access and thoughtful, investigative exploration. As with any Web resource, on first visit it is helpful to study the layout of the homepage. Most successful sites divide their homepage into areas that provide insightful information as well as access to the nooks and crannies of the site itself. The VCOL homepage employs this approach very well.

Across the top of the VCOL homepage are navigation buttons that connect to each of the four focused VCOL neighborhoods. These buttons allow the user quick access to his or her neighborhood of choice without having to wander through extraneous information. The bottom of the page contains these same links in a text format. The middle of the page provides timely information about a topic of interest. These Word on the Street articles serve to whet the user's appetite for information contained within the site. Down both sides of the VCOL homepage are links to interesting and timely tidbits available within the site's resource collection. The left side of the page provides the more static service links to the usual Search, About Us, Contact Us, Site Map, and Copyright and Privacy areas. Interspersed within these service links are links to opportunities that enable the user to contribute to the site in both organized and spontaneous ways.

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One such opportunity is Highlight a Teacher. This option allows the user to enter information about a teacher, class, or school involved in activities that are exciting, creative, and note worthy. This information might be featured as a future VCOL Spotlight on Education. By taking the time to provide such insight, the user enables VCOL to promote, to the state and the world, activities and accomplishments in schools across Virginia.

Two other user contribution opportunities are Submit a Site and Include Your Organization. These two entry points allow users, with little effort, to expand the VCOL resource offerings. Users who have found sites that are particularly useful in their area of expertise or interest can, through Submit a Site, provide basic information that will allow VCOL to recognize the site's worth, catalog it within the VCOL collection structure, and link it to the greater educational community. The Include Your Organization option provides an opportunity for Virginia educational organizations to have a link from the VCOL web site to their organization's site. By taking advantage of these user contribution opportunities, the user helps the VCOL resource collection become a more comprehensive anthology of related resources.

Another service link found on the left of the VCOL homepage is Educator's Calendar. It has long been a goal of many Virginia educators to have a single clearinghouse for educational activities. Educator's Calendar provides such an opportunity. Users can view the calendar to find information about conferences, symposia, workshops, and other activities. Users can also contribute information to the calendar.

For example, if a health and physical education teacher happens to learn of a conference devoted to Approaches to Exercise and Diet for Adolescent Children and feels this conference could be an excellent opportunity for health and physical education colleagues, that teacher can request to have the conference noted on the calendar. In this way, it would not be left to happenstance to alert colleagues to the opportunity. There would be a recognized resource that provides the information. Educator's Calendar is a resource that thrives on user participation and support.

Within these service options, Send a Lesson should become an extremely powerful user contribution opportunity. Send a Lesson is envisioned to provide a uniform lesson plan format that addresses Virginia accountability issues and allows Virginia educators to share successful approaches to instruction across the curriculum. At present, this option is not operational; it is being refined to make certain that it will meet the needs of classroom educators at all levels and within all curricular areas.

Current links within the Classrooms neighborhood provide access to collections of lesson plans, but the VCOL Send a Lesson option will eventually provide a collection of lesson plans tailored specifically to the needs of Virginia educators. Imagine the possibilities if each Virginia educator contributed just one VCOL lesson plan. The collection would then include thousands of Virginia bred lessons that focus on Virginia's instructional needs.

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On the right side of the homepage is the Neighborhood Spotlight area. Much as the VCOL homepage offers the Word on the Street articles, each neighborhood's main page includes Spotlights focused on timely resources of neighborhood interest. By glancing at the VCOL homepage Spotlights area, the user can quickly get a glimpse of the current featured spotlight for each neighborhood. If a topic peaks his or her interest, the user can quickly use the link to learn more about the topic. If time is of the essence or no listed spotlight on this particular visit seems to be crucially relevant, the user can then quickly move to the neighborhood of choice to access focused resources and information.

The Neighborhoods

Without leaving the VCOL homepage, the user has access to services and snippets of information, but entering the VCOL neighborhoods demonstrates the true value of Virginia's Community of Learning. Each neighborhood provides the user a comprehensive array of focused resources. To heighten awareness of the focus, each neighborhood's pages are color coordinated. All Classroom pages are enhanced in blue; Technologies, in green; Professional Development, in yellow; and Resources, in red. This color coordination may seem a trivial detail, but it allows the user to remain connected to and aware of the neighborhood he or she is exploring.

Each neighborhood's main page is structured similarly to the VCOL homepage. In fact, the top and bottom buttons and text links are identical throughout the site. Even the left margin service links are replicated and appear on all pages. This continuity provides the user a heightened familiarity and comfort level while exploring and using the site.

The remaining areas of a neighborhood's main page provide the focus and insight of that neighborhood. The center of the page offers the neighborhood's current Spotlight article. Whereas the VCOL homepage's Word on the Street offers information that may cross neighborhood boundaries, a neighborhood Spotlight focuses on a resource closely tied to that VCOL neighborhood. A Spotlight provides timely snippets that may entice the user to explore in detail this noted information.

The contents area or right side of a neighborhood's main page, displays a links list of the neighborhood's resources. In Classrooms, for example, there are presently two main listings: Subject Areas and Classroom Resources. The Classrooms Subject Areas include Art, Career Technology & Vocational Education, Computer/Technology, English, Foreign Languages, Health & Physical Education, History/Social Science, Mathematics, Music, Science, and Work & Family Studies. If he or she clicks on any of these subjects, the user enters that subject's page with links to information organized in categories such as Instructional Resources, Curriculum Sites, Professional Organizations, and Learning Activities/Web Quests. Within the contents area of the Classrooms main page, the Classroom Resources list provides links to category listings of Teacher Portals, English as a Second Language, Library Resources, Special Education, Teaching Tips & Teacher Tools, Virginia SOL, and Webquests. Each of these listed links in turn provides focused resource links aligned to each category.

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While the Classrooms neighborhood may seem to provide the greatest wealth of information for the Virginia educator, the other VCOL neighborhoods offer additional focused riches. The Technologies neighborhood provides both the technophile and technophobe insight into technology as an entity with links to category listings of Operating Systems, Hardware, Software, Peripherals, Vendors, and Shareware. In addition to the computer as a technology, the Technologies neighborhood includes information on Handheld/Portable Devices, Video Conferencing, and Wireless Application.

There is even a links list for Training & Tools that relates specifically to emerging and existing technologies. The Professional Development neighborhood's contents area cites links to categories relating to Certification, Conferences, eLearning, Higher Education Programs, Professional Development Planning, Recruitment, and Retirement. The Resources neighborhood catalogues links to general resources in categories of Online Publications; Libraries & Museums; Reference Material; Schools, Colleges, & Universities; Organizations; Grants; Career Information; and Parent/Home Support.

Throughout VCOL some resource links tend to cross neighborhood boundaries. Such links, therefore, may appear in several places within the Community. For example, the user will find a link to VAHPERD (Virginia Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance) cited within the Classrooms neighborhood under Health and Physical Education and also cited within the Resources neighborhood under Organizations. VCOL makes every effort to provide links where—indeed everywhere—they make the most sense as a resource to the user. The purpose of creating a resource community is not to impede or delay access to a resource; it is to provide easy, logical access to needed information.

A Historical Perspective

Virginia's Community of Learning is a monumental endeavor that did not spring full grown like Pallas Athena, but evolved from exceptional antecedents. Virginia has consistently been in the forefront of providing electronic educational resources. It was the first state to provide free e-mail access to public school educators. Virginia's Public Education Network (VaPEN) provided, at the time, unheard of opportunities for educators individually to share information and instructional resources. A small group of volunteers, who were passionate about this technology and recognized the possibilities it offered, devised a means for capitalizing on the resource and created Virginia's Electronic Academical Village.

Patterned after Jefferson's design for the University of Virginia, which he called his "Academical Village", the Electronic Academical Village was organized around Pavilions that focused on resources in the various curricular areas. This text-based resource provided the first statewide, on-line sharing of curricular resources.

As technology evolved and graphical interfaces emerged, the Electronic Academical Village morphed into the Anthology Project. The Anthology Project endeavored to continue the goal of the text based Electronic Academical Village and to offer instructional resources in the new medium of the Internet.

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While the resource files resided on servers housed at the Virginia Department of Education and within the VaPEN structure, throughout the electronic resources evolutionary process, each endeavor relied very heavily on volunteer support to gather, post, and maintain the resources.

The initial organizational structure was such that the process was very labor intensive. Maintenance of the resources required a great deal of effort from the few, overworked, volunteer support individuals. This organizational flaw jeopardized the entire endeavor. The situation reached such critical mass that there was danger that needed support for the project would disappear and all of the resources would be lost.

At this point, the Virginia Society for Technology in Education (VSTE) suggested that it could assume responsibility for the resources if other entities would help shoulder the load. To this end, in 1998 representatives from VSTE, the Virginia Educational Technology Alliance (VETA), and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) met to discuss ways for saving the resources and continuing to offer this service to Virginia's educational community. From these talks emerged Virginia's Community of Learning. In February 2000, VaPEN's electronic instructional resources were transferred from the Virginia Department of Education to VSTE. Working in partnership with VETA and VDOE, VSTE now houses VCOL and has assumed the major responsibility for its maintenance and continued well-being.

The Structural Difference and Opportunities for Participation

The major difference in the structure of the electronic resource environment that had been and that which now exists is a different approach to the distribution of the tasks and workload. A basic premise of Virginia's Community of Learning is that the energy, effort, and work needed to support such a valuable resource must be distributed across the community.

Service opportunities are designed to allow many hands to perform small, manageable tasks that together maintain the community. In this construct, no person who volunteers to help will be called upon beyond the limits of his or her energy, passion, desire, or availability to serve. The welfare of the whole entity is not dependent upon any one individual and is not diminished by the ebb and flow of volunteer interest or energy. On the contrary, VCOL's welfare is enhanced by the contributions of experienced and new participants alike.

Anyone with a passion for education, a desire to be involved, and a willingness to share time—a little or a lot—can help support the VCOL effort. The crucial understanding is that no one who offers to help will be called upon to do more than he or she is willing or able to do. Tiny steps, as well as giant leaps, will carry VCOL forward. The choice is left to the participant.

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Volunteer Support

As noted, Virginia's Community of Learning is organized around four general neighborhoods: Classrooms, Technologies, Professional Development, and Resources. Each of these neighborhoods has an individual focus that may be best suited to an individual volunteer's interest or passion; however, the general nature of each neighborhood's support needs falls within four generic task responsibilities and job classifications:

VCOL Resource Hound

VCOL Resource Hounds are continually on the lookout for organizations, entities, individuals, and areas of interest for their chosen VCOL focus area. VCOL Resource Hounds recommend sites and resources that are new to the VCOL collection or that have exciting activities or topics of interest that might have timely importance for VCOL Spotlights.

VCOL Scholar

VCOL Scholars have two tasks. 1) They review resources that have been recommended for the collection to make certain that the recommended resource is appropriate for the assigned area or for the collection itself; and 2) they periodically visit posted resources within the collection to make certain that the links are valid and the information remains pertinent to their VCOL focus area. VCOL Scholars work within the selected assigned area for which they are "responsible" and passionate.

VCOL Spotlight Reviewer

VCOL Spotlight Reviewers review and evaluate information that has been recommended for a VCOL Spotlight in their selected focus area. VCOL Spotlight Reviewers participate in developing criteria by which each recommended resource is reviewed.

VCOL Liaison

VCOL Liaisons are communication links between VCOL and various professional and curricular organizations. VCOL Liaisons maintain, on behalf of VCOL, a connection to these organizations. This connection may take the form of direct communication or of a simple monitoring of the organization's web site. VCOL Liaisons inform organizations of the VCOL site and request link privileges for the VCOL site. In addition, VCOL Liaisons request the organization to place a link to the VCOL site from the organization's site. VCOL Liaisons seek suggestions for areas or activities of the organization that might deserve a VCOL Spotlight promotion. The goal of a VCOL Liaison is to maintain a dialog on ways VCOL can assist and be assisted by professional and curricular organizations. Where appropriate, it is most helpful if the VCOL Liaison is a member of the organization to which he or she is liaison.

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The beauty of a community is that everyone tends to care, everyone tends to help, and everyone tends to benefit. This is particularly true in the educational community. Virginia's Community of Learning promotes this construct and offers educators across the state an invitation to participate as volunteer or visitor.

About the Author

Harley Miles is Chair of the Virginia's Community of Learning Management Council and Division Coordinator for Technology and Testing in the Charlottesville City Schools. He can be reached at Harley.Miles@ccs.k12.va.us

