

Educake Case Study

Beacon Academy, East Sussex





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We talked to the Head of Science at a rural comprehensive academy about their first two months of using Educake, including reducing the marking load, students' feedback, getting started with Educake and their science budget.

Background

Beacon Academy is a split site, rural, mixed-comprehensive converter academy with approximately 1400 students, including 350 in their sixth-form. The school was rated as good in the latest OFSTED report in 2013.

The school started using Educake in September 2016, and their students had answered over one hundred thousand questions by half term in mid-October.

We talked to Sarah Mercer, Head of Science, in November 2016 and began by asking why Beacon Academy started using Educake, and how it has helped their students:

Why did you start using Educake?

Sarah: I started in the post in September, and noticed that Science results were lagging behind Maths and English, mainly because the students didn't have the knowledge they could recall and then use.

The maths department have been using MyMaths for several years, and it's been really successful for them, so we looked for something that could do a similar job.

How did you get started with Educake?

We took each class to a computer room to get them going, and set them some tests. It's easy to use, so there weren't any problems.

One thing that really helped get students going was making a big fuss of individual successes, with extra praise for those who'd made a big effort. The student league table in Educake really helped us do this. We wanted to make answering questions in Educake a habit for them.

What are you using Educake for?

Mainly for weekly homework of short answer questions to build knowledge. Also for independent learning – students can set themselves tests too. We sometimes run catch-up sessions after school for students, where anyone can go along to get extra help, and we use Educake for these, identifying which bits the students need to work on. It triggers the right conversations.

Closer to the exams we'll also use Educake as a revision system. We can set the students revision tests, and also they can see the bits they don't know, and then set themselves tests too, and this is good because Educake shows them what bits they don't know well enough. It's only October but many students have already set themselves over 500 questions.

Has there been any change in the students?

Students really like Educake. They like that they can disagree with the marking of a question, and send us a message. They like the instant feedback they get after each question.

Even the bottom set like it, even those with high SEN. I think this is because it is low-stakes testing. Nothing bad happens if they get the answer wrong, they're just told what the right answer was, to help them remember it for next time. All of this means they're not embarrassed to get it wrong, but just happy to have a go. The short questions help too – there isn't a lot of writing they have to do.

Educake definitely builds confidence. It gives the students confidence because they're not frightened of the 'strange' words – come the exams they'll have seen "sub-atomic particle" many times before.

What has been the response from teachers at Beacon Academy?

The vast majority have been very positive about Educake and I haven't had any negative feedback. I've tried other online assessment things in the past at other schools and only one or two other teachers tend to use them. Now they all use Educake. I'm not sure exactly why this is, but Educake is definitely easier to use. The only problem might be over-reliance, but that's a problem I'd be happy to address in the future if it came up.

The fact that you can stick the results up on a whiteboard as students walk in to a lesson is really powerful. The teacher can say, "You haven't done any questions," and point to the results. It's motivating. Then the teacher can go through the

queries on individual question as a ten minute starter, or talk about the questions that students struggled with.

There were some worries about running out of questions, but there are thousands and thousands of them, and also, how can you run out if you're not getting 100%? Questions can be recycled and asked again later in the year.

The teachers also like that it isn't just multiple choice, so students properly have to think about the question.

Has it helped with teachers' workload?

Yes, definitely. I'll talk about our year 11 classes – we set quite formalised homework each week, one long piece, and then one Educake piece. Using Educake means one hour less a week marking for every teacher, just for their year 11 classes. I haven't worked out how much that would be across all their classes, but it's a lot.

The biggest thing is that we're not doing stupid ticks and crosses on short answer questions, so we have time (and energy) to mark essays and longer answers.

What's your IT set up like in Beacon Academy?

It's quite middle of the road, I'd say. Pretty good, but not one to one. We have an IT room we can book, and occasionally we can get a class set of iPads.

Most of the students use Educake at home, and we have no problems, probably because it works on anything: PCs, tablets, phones, anything.

Do you use any other online resources at Beacon Academy?

We have one of the big online packages that goes with textbooks but it does different things like online textbooks and access to worksheets, but it doesn't have enough depth in questioning. Also, some of the other online resources are extortionate!

We always have to be careful about how we spend our budget and ensure we get value for money. We just can't have things we don't need. That's why it's really important that the things we do have are used, like Educake is. Also, Educake essentially cuts a big chunk from our photocopying budget.

Anything else?

I really, really like the required practical questions for the new GCSEs, because that's something we've got to nail in the new GCSEs. It's great having that facility to do different things, like the Maths for Science questions too.

Oh, and I bumped into our headteacher this morning and the first thing she said was, "One hundred thousand questions on Educake! Great!"

Sarah Mercer was speaking to Charley Darbshire, founder of Educake in November 2016.

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