SIDE has demonstrated how effectively Saba Classroom supports mainstream learning. We use it for daily core curricula, where it’s proven to be phenomenally effective in driving high-level learning behaviors.

Angela Signorile, Saba Classroom Coordinator and Italian Teacher, SIDE

CHALLENGE
Empower teachers to provide engaging eLearning to Western Australian students located anywhere in the world.

BENEFITS
- Facilitate active learning with key values such as critical thinking, synthesizing ideas and collaboration
- Deliver richer, fully interactive educational experiences to students isolated by distance or circumstance
- Provide students with virtual, face-to-face access to experts and luminaries around the globe
- Enable teachers to tailor learning and differentiate exercises and activities according to individual student or group needs
- Provide superior teacher training in remote locations
- Support interactive oral examinations for students abroad

Encompassing 2.6 million square kilometers, Western Australia is Australia’s largest state. It is also one of the world’s least densely populated regions, with 85 percent of its 2.3 million residents clustered along the coast and the rest scattered across a vast outback.

eLearning has been an important feature of the state’s K–12 education landscape since 2004, when the Western Australia Department of Education’s Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) implemented the Saba Classroom video and web collaboration platform, part of the Saba Meeting solution. SIDE’s use of Saba Classroom quickly became a model for web conferencing as an engaging, interactive, real-time virtual learning environment — enabling students to take lessons remotely regardless of their geographic location. Today, SIDE is Western Australia’s leading K–12 distance education provider, employing more than 150 teachers and providing learning for more than 3,000 students statewide, delivering over 100 lessons a day.
SIDE has demonstrated how effectively Saba Classroom supports mainstream learning. Saba Classroom isn’t just reserved for special programs. We use it for daily core curricula, where it’s proven to be phenomenally effective in driving high-level learning behaviors. Kids embrace the system enthusiastically and teachers just can’t stop using it.

Angela Signorile, Saba Classroom coordinator and Italian teacher for SIDE

HISTORY LESSON

The use of technology in distance learning has a long tradition in Western Australia. In 1918, a SIDE predecessor introduced correspondence learning to K–12 students. Lessons were delivered in printed booklets, occasionally supplemented by phone calls. Feedback from teachers arrived via Australia Post, up to a month after students submitted their work. This obviously greatly impacted the learning process.

By the 1950s, the program was called School of the Air and shared a high-frequency (HF) radio network with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. When that service was discontinued, the Department of Education turned to the Internet, installing a far-reaching satellite network — with dishes sometimes flown into the most remote areas by helicopter.

Today, SIDE’s Saba-supported online learning environment brings together a variety of students throughout Western Australia, including those who:

- Live in geographically remote, indigenous settlements or isolated communities across the state, where travel time prevents them from attending a regular school
- Are elite sportspeople and artists whose training demands and travel interfere with typical classroom schedules
- Are pursuing advanced degrees or studying specialized subjects
- Have families that travel frequently or reside overseas
- Have special needs or are facing medical issues
- Are youth offenders in detention
- Are young, school-aged parents

In addition, SIDE is using Saba Classroom to reach a wider world — such as delivering interactive oral exams to more than 1,000 English-as-a-second-language, university-bound students residing in China, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam — without the examiners ever leaving Australia.
SIDE’s focus on active learning includes empowering students to question, synthesize, think critically and actively collaborate in group activities. Saba Classroom makes this possible, providing students and teachers with high-quality audio and video, whiteboards, virtual breakout rooms, and other functionality to enable true interactivity and individualized learning. Teachers can easily differentiate tasks for specific students, while students work together on simulations, experiments, or other group activities. Senior secondary students particularly enjoy Saba Classroom’s ability to record classroom sessions to enhance retention and exam preparation weeks or months later.

“We’ve come as close as I’ve ever seen to replicating the ‘live’ classroom experience with its rich interactivity and collaboration,” Signorile remarked. “As a result, we’re seeing students much more engaged in lessons and doing high-level work. That’s why the use of Saba Classroom is such a core thing for us. It is not just a way of communicating; it’s a way of actively teaching.”

Saba Classroom delivers its extensive eLearning functionality with virtually no issues related to bandwidth. The satellite network installed by the Department of Education serves the needs of even the most remote students. Where other web conferencing applications would have failed to make the grade supported by a limited-bandwidth infrastructure, Saba Classroom passed with flying colors.

“Saba Classroom works in a wide variety of environments,” explained Jonathan Bromage, deputy principal, SIDE. “We’re teachers, not technicians. Yet we’ve been able to get every student connected into Saba Classroom successfully, working in partnership with the Department of Education.”

When it was first installed, many teachers were not familiar with Saba Classroom’s eLearning technology. To address this, SIDE hosted workshops, followed by one-on-one support and mentoring to help teachers learn how to best integrate Saba Classroom into their teaching style. SIDE called upon highly respected teachers to provide the training and pedagogical support, which gave them added credibility with their colleagues.

“eLearning technology isn’t just for young teachers,” Bromage noted. “We took a group of very experienced teachers who might not be expected to take the lead in using technology in their teaching, and quickly got them adept at using Saba Classroom. From there, acceptance grew like wildfire.”

Students are just as enthusiastic about Saba Classroom as their teachers. SIDE’s administrative systems allow schools to easily enroll students via an online portal. Saba Classroom IDs, calendars, and LMS-based courses are automatically generated, and email capability is provided. Within 24 hours of enrollment, students have full access to Saba’s powerful learning tools.

SIDE is currently in the process of going mobile, enabling Saba Classroom’s eLearning to also be received on smart devices such as iPhones and iPads — the latter of which could really immerse a student in a subject such as art history.
It is a very easy platform to learn, and young children, seven or eight years old, have no problems at all using it. It’s become so popular that we have students asking other students when they’re having a Saba Classroom lesson, and even asking their teachers for more Saba Classroom lessons. In that respect, it’s taken on a life of its own.

Angela Signorile, Saba Classroom coordinator and Italian teacher for SIDE

INSPIRATION THROUGH AUTHORS ONLINE

Recently, Saba Classroom has enabled SIDE to bring even more real-world learning into the virtual classroom. As part of a shared initiative between the Resource Center and the English Learning Area, SIDE introduced Authors Online — a series of seminars for both Lower and Senior School English students. Using Saba Classroom, SIDE students regularly meet and interact with noted professors, authors and other luminaries.

For example, guest lecturers have included Hetty Verolme, author of The Children’s House of Belsen, who described her experiences surviving the Nazi persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands during World War II. Another guest lecturer was Cheryl Kickett-Taylor, who discussed her book Barlay!, a part of the Waarda indigenous children’s series that communicates the richness and depth of the Noongar language and indigenous storytelling to non-indigenous students.

Through Saba Classroom, students also met the 2011 Young Australian of the Year, Jessica Watson, the youngest person to single-handedly sail nonstop around the world. She participated in international web conferencing sessions with students from Western Australia and other countries — who could listen, ask questions, and marvel at her determination and courage.

eLEARNING GOES STATEWIDE

The technology’s ongoing expansion has been accelerated by the Department of Education’s commitment to Saba Meeting and Saba Classroom as a core delivery platform — setting the stage for all Western Australian teachers and students to follow the path pioneered by SIDE. In 2012, SIDE announced the planned delivery of 12 online courses to comply with the newly created Australian Curriculum. Phase 1 of the national curriculum — which will include English, mathematics, science and history — is scheduled for implementation in Western Australia by July 2015.

Ultimately, the technology has helped shape the way in which both teachers and students approach formal and informal learning. For example, SIDE’s “How to teach using Saba Classroom” includes a mission-critical set of online teacher capabilities that represent best practices for student engagement in eLearning. Led by Ross Manson, head of online teaching and learning at SIDE, the focus is on teaching more effectively, whether in an online or real-world, face-to-face environment.

“Teaching is all about hooking kids into learning, and if you’re thinking that the technology is going to do that for you, you’re wrong,” Signorile explained. “You have to be a good teacher before you can become a good online teacher. What Saba Classroom does is make it easier for good teachers to be great at teaching online.”
The award is international recognition that the model we have developed — with the support of the eSchooling and ICT directorates — has significantly increased the quality of access to curriculum for country and remote students.

Jonathan Bromage  
Deputy Principal, SIDE

HIGH MARKS AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Every public school in Western Australia publishes its dux, or highest performing academic student. In 2011, 20 percent of these schools had dux students studying at least one subject through SIDE’s eLearning program. But perhaps the most important measure of success is that, at any time of the day or night, dozens and sometimes hundreds of students — within Western Australia and elsewhere — are online, learning in a 21st century way.

In 2013, out of more than 700 nominations worldwide, the Computerworld Honors Program recognized SIDE as a Laureate in Collaboration for the innovative use of IT to promote knowledge-sharing and enable collaboration that results in measurable economic, social, environmental, or innovation gains.