



K-12 Professional Development, AP, & Credit Recovery Courses Across Kentucky Come Alive with Wimba

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Beth Gaunce, Program Consultant & World Languages Instructor, Kentucky Virtual Schools

"Teachers and professional development providers need to connect synchronously to engender the feeling of community," says Beth Gaunce, a Program Consultant and world languages instructor for the Kentucky Virtual Schools (KYVS) who has attended numerous online professional development workshops offered by the state. "Professional Learning Communities' are growing in importance and Wimba is the essence of their communication for us."

KYVS, a program of the Kentucky Department of Education, offers numerous professional development (PD) opportunities online, covering topics such as School Based Decision Making, Keys to Proficient Councils, and Council Work and School Culture. With more than 5,000 Kentucky educators who have already completed PD courses, KYVS believes its PD courses are:

- High quality, interactive, facilitated
- Accessible anywhere, anytime, anyplace via an Internet-connected computer
- Opportunities to learn and share best practices and resources

- Eligible for up to 24 hours EILA or PD credit
- Available to all educators

Additionally, students throughout Kentucky take engaging, rigorous high school courses online through the KYVS. In choosing KYVS, schools are able to provide students with equal access to expanded learning options, flexible scheduling, and an engaging learning environment that differs from the traditional classroom setting. According to its website, districts, schools, and teachers throughout Kentucky can integrate KYVS services into their programs to find new ways to provide:

- Access to expanded curricular offerings, including 23 Advanced Placement courses and four years of 4 world languages
- Options for credit recovery
- Increased instructional support for at-risk students
- Expanded choices to meet Gifted and Talented students' needs



Kentucky Virtual Schools
Frankfort, KY
www.kyvs.org

WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Wimba Classroom
- Wimba Voice
- Wimba Pronto

KEY BENEFITS

- Offer classes otherwise not available to students in local schools or districts
- 100's of teachers take professional development courses
- K-12 students receive the communicative, lively instruction they need

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WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

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For years, both its professional development and academic courses were offered entirely asynchronously, based on the Blackboard course management system. However, students and teachers began asking for more collaborative tools in order to make the online curriculum come alive. Enter Wimba.

On the academic side, Wimba is used in most subjects, with world language instruction being the most common. However, until KYVS acquired Wimba Classroom in 2003, its teachers were only able to use text online – obviously missing the important speaking and listening components of languages. In fact, Gaunce began teaching at KYVS in the early 2000's and has a vivid memory of insisting that her boss, "not ask me to tell my world language colleagues that we could meet all world language teaching standards until we had collaborative software – a way to do the interpersonal communication," she says, smiling.

KYVS acquired Wimba Classroom so its language faculty (who teach everything from French and Spanish to Chinese and German) could allow their students to easily vocally communicate online. Wimba Classroom's simple interface was a hit with the language faculty and they quickly saw better results from their students. Now, teachers regularly rely on Wimba Classroom to hold live online tutorials so students can get extra help, even though their teacher might be located on the other side of the state.

"Wimba is an enhancement that makes extra support and individualized work with students possible," Gaunce says proudly.

In fact, KYVS would soon acquire Wimba Voice which its eight language teachers now use several times a week, particularly voice email,

so their 200+ students can post graded vocal recordings and so teachers can make fun vocal announcements. Consisting of voice boards, voice email, a voice recorder, a podcast creation tool, and voice presentation software, students now have numerous ways to speak and hear new languages.

Beyond world languages, there are several examples of innovative – and fun – uses of the Wimba Collaboration Suite. For example, one AP English teacher makes podcasts of student writings. He'll read a few writings aloud and vocally critique each piece. The idea is that when his students download and hear their words, something intuitive happens and they know, for example, that they have written something out of place within the rest of a paragraph. According to the AP English teacher, having a student hear words aloud via podcasts is much more effective than writing "irrelevant" on a sheet of paper.

Further, an AP Environmental Science teacher uses Wimba Classroom for review sessions before unit and AP exams, voice email to disseminate announcement reminders, and Pronto to improve her accessibility to her students.

Which brings us to Pronto.

As if using Wimba Classroom for live online tutorials and Wimba Voice for vocal instruction wasn't good enough, KYVS adopted Wimba Pronto in 2007 to enable its students to instantly communicate with the system's 40 teachers any time day and night.

Wimba Pronto, the only instant messaging system designed for education, as it pulls the enrollment information from KYVS's Blackboard system in order to automatically populate each student's contact list with their classmates and teachers.



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ABOUT WIMBA

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, webpages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

Because Wimba Pronto operates within KYVS's computing infrastructure, it remains secure, not allowing anyone from outside of KYVS to get in contact with teachers or students.

With Pronto, students now instantly ask their teachers, and each other, questions via text or their voice about their schoolwork.

"More than half of our 40 teachers across all disciplines use Pronto. The kids LOVE it!" says Gaunce, emphatically. "Having it linked through Blackboard makes it easy and quick to use."

On the professional development side, KYVS's eLearning Kentucky (ELK) PD providers always use Wimba Classroom for their meetings, training, and planning sessions, and the online communities team requires all participants use Wimba Voice. In fact, Wimba is now considered to be an integral part of most professional development sessions.

"Our instructors/PD providers are really happy to be able to attend what they equate to faculty meetings," Gaunce says. "And to have archives to watch if they can't get there synchronously."

For instance, when prepping a course, professional development leaders are required to create a vocal welcome message for each session and place it on the assignment page. It's

amazing how much more powerful it is to hear one's voice instead of reading a typed message.

Kentucky is currently growing a larger state-wide hybrid professional development program that will use the Wimba Collaboration Suite even more heavily. But ultimately, all professional development training comes back to ensuring teachers are prepared to best help their students succeed, even if at times the teachers are actually catching up to their students. According to Gaunce, KYVS now meets students' baseline technology expectations by using Wimba Classroom, but exceeds those expectations by offering Pronto.

"Students don't find using Wimba as clever as the adults do – it's life as usual for them – but they need and love the synchronous personal attention that Pronto provides."

But regardless how much a student may enjoy using a particular technology, the true test of any software is shown by how well students achieve. And thus far, Wimba is passing with flying colors.

"Synchronous communication in a largely non-synchronous process helps students connect to teachers, ask immediate questions, and get individualized instruction," Gaunce says. "Wimba contributes in a significant way to student success."