

Microsoft Partners in Learning Customer Reference



Developing 21st-century skills

Latvian teachers find that 10,000 heads are better than one

Fast Facts

Partner: Ventspils Digital Centre

Country: Latvia

Website: www.skolotajs.lv

"The portal is very valuable, especially because I can find ideas there... The ideas are amazing. They're the most important thing – ideas, ideas, ideas."

Ingrīda Zilgalve,
Teacher, Mārsnēni primary school

Since Medieval times, the Baltic port of Ventspils has been an important hub for shipping and trade. Today, Ventspils has become a hub of a very different sort, thanks to the Ventspils City Council's Digital Centre.

A small team at the centre, headed by portal administrator Kristians Jacevics, works to maintain and update Latvia's Innovative Teachers portal, the online centre of educational materials, ideas, discussion and sharing for teachers from the country's 1,078 schools.

The portal was launched in October 2004, just one month after Jacevics joined the Ventspils Digital Centre in the Latvian city of Ventspils. At that time,

the Microsoft® Partners in Learning initiative had begun working with the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science to provide opportunities for teachers to build their skills, share experience, and encourage the use of technology in the classroom. The portal

was devised to meet these objectives, and the Ventspils Digital Centre offered its development and management resources to host it. Microsoft funded the portal through the Partners in Learning programme.

In just two years since its launch, the portal has become a cornerstone of Latvia's educational practices. It's where teachers go to share materials and tips and discuss ideas with other teachers across the country.

Nearly 10,000 teachers are registered on the portal, about a third of all the teachers in Latvia. Together they have uploaded over 2,000 submissions, including lesson plans, examinations, assessments, articles and more. This reflects the idea that the best way to learn is from one's peers, as expressed by Aija Tūna, Programme Director at the Education Development Centre: "For a teacher, it's important to understand how successful one's professional work is. The best way to do this is to look into the mirror, and that mirror is other professionals; those with whom one can share common needs, interests and challenges, with whom to look for good solutions and to continue one's professional and personal development."

In addition to teacher submissions, the portal carries the latest news from across Latvia and the web, along with up-to-date curricula and book reviews, events and course listings. The team at the Ventspils Digital Centre has also developed online course materials on how to use common software products, including the Microsoft® Office suite.

Fast Facts

Customer Profile:

Latvia's teachers now benefit from a place to meet and share ideas. The Innovative Teachers portal, created in 2004, hosts teaching materials submitted by teachers, as well as IT courses for teachers, a wide range of discussion forums and other useful educational materials. Almost 10,000 teachers from across Latvia are already benefiting.

The portal was sponsored by the Microsoft Partners in Learning initiative in accordance with the Memorandum signed with the Latvia's Ministry of Education and Science. It is developed, hosted and operated by the Ventspils Digital Centre. The Partners in Learning programme funded the portal's development and continues to provide funding for awards, promotional activities and additional events hosted by the Ventspils Digital Centre.

Around a third of Latvia's teachers are using the Innovative Teachers portal to share experiences and ideas that improve education and the use of technology in learning.

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The courses are designed specifically for teachers who are beginners in the use of information technology, and there are online tests to assess learning.

To recognise and reward the enthusiastic use of the portal by teachers, Jacevics and his team have developed a system for users to earn points for their contributions. Each semester, the highest scorers win donated prizes, including Microsoft software and educational books.

The portal's value extends beyond the sharing of teaching excellence.

It has helped teachers develop their own IT skills, which is of vital importance when dealing with students who are extremely familiar with computers and the Internet. The portal's forums are also a meeting place for teachers to socialise with one another, and to communicate with and submit questions to the government department responsible for the development of educational curricula and examinations. Feedback to Jacevics' team reveals how vital the portal has become to teachers: many check it every day for materials and discussions, and new teachers are joining each week.

"When I find something useful on the portal, I share and distribute it to other teachers at my school," says Ingrida

Zilgalve, a teacher at Mārsnēni primary school. "The portal is very valuable, especially because I can find ideas there. We usually make changes to the work done by others – because children, environment and culture are different everywhere. But the ideas are amazing. They're the most important thing – ideas, ideas, ideas."

The team led by Jacevics is always keen to develop the portal and build on its success. They monitor feedback on the forums and make changes to suit users, working with the Partners in Learning team to implement larger projects if funding is required. And the portal has led to other activities.

"We're planning to tour the country offering free computer courses to portal users," says Jacevics. "All we will ask in return is for attendees to prepare and submit materials to the portal, to share what they've learned with others."

Undoubtedly, the portal has proved an invaluable tool for Latvia's teachers. But what about for Jacevics and the Ventspils Digital Centre? "It's been a great opportunity for us to do something national, rather than just local," he reveals. "After I came to work at the Ventspils Digital Centre, I was very happy to take on the portal as my responsibility. Watching it grow has been really rewarding."