

Beyond the Courtroom: Tom O'Bryan's Second Act as an Online Educator

Interview with Tom O'Bryan, Online Teacher at VHS Learning

After working in the legal profession for 20+ years, Tom O'Bryan was ready for a career change. He looked at the potential options and took an immediate liking to the online learning arena, which in 2010 was still taking shape but already positively impacting the K-12 educational landscape.

"I didn't know what online learning entailed at the time, but when the opportunity to become a virtual teacher surfaced, I said sure, why not?" says O'Bryan, an online teacher at VHS Learning. He started out teaching high school English and social studies courses to students in Jacksonville, Fla., but then learned about VHS Learning and signed up for the organization's 4-week-long Online Teaching Methodologies (OTM) course.

The graduate-level course is conducted entirely online and teaches participants how to use and apply resources, tools, and strategies to create engaging, effective learning experiences in the VHS Learning classroom. After completing the rigorous course, O'Bryan—who holds a full-time position with for-profit online education provider Edmentum—was asked to teach VHS Learning's AP Human Geography course

"I'd taught several AP classes before, including language arts, English and social studies," says O'Bryan. "I started teaching for VHS Learning in September 2024 and can't believe the school year is almost over. It really flew by."

Bringing Lessons to Life

O'Bryan has spoken at different online symposiums and events over the years, sharing his ideas and research on student engagement with other virtual teachers.

He says OTM includes a heavy focus on the engagement piece and that VHS Learning itself hosts a "very active" discussion board for students.

"There's a new topic every week; students are graded on their contributions to the discussion board," says O'Bryan, who has seen other virtual schools try this approach with little success.

"VHS Learning has figured it out and it's great because teachers are encouraged to jump in and respond to students' comments and posts, and to stoke conversations with them."

From the instructor's perspective, O'Bryan says VHS Learning lays out the framework for effective, continuous student engagement in a way that takes the pressure off the individual teacher. "It makes my job so much easier," he explains. "I can jump into a discussion, comment on a student's post and get their responses. I love the discussion board and the student engagement that it supports."

VHS Learning also offers "news items," which includes original content posted by the teachers themselves. "I think outside of the box and post videos whenever I can," says O'Bryan, who uses the videos as tie-ins for the topics he's teaching during any given week. For example, he recently filmed some footage at the University of Florida's campus and used it to create news items on what it's like to live in a college town (Gainesville).

O'Bryan also uses the news items to showcase student-related events, accomplishments and travel notes that tie into their current coursework.



For example, one student who visited an Idaho potato museum on a family ski trip created a video and shared photos of the experience. "We were studying agriculture and human geography at the time," says O'Bryan, "so he thought the videos and pictures would be a great way to bring those lessons to life."

Many Layers of Teacher and Student Support

During his first semester as an online instructor at VHS Learning, O'Bryan worked with a VHS Learning mentor who answered his questions, provided feedback and shared success tips and tricks with him. "A teacher in this position needs support and VHS Learning has been awesome with that," he says. "There are multiple people there ready to help at any given minute, plus VHS Learning has a wealth of resources that I can turn to for help. They have a lot of layers of support."

VHS Learning also has site coordinators, who serve as in-school liaisons who are able to follow up with students onsite and help ensure they are staying on track. If O'Bryan sees that a student has missed class all week, for example, the site coordinator checks in with the student to see why and provide support as needed. "I've never experienced that level of support with my students in any other teaching environment," says O'Bryan.

"VHS Learning has a mechanism set up for kids who need to turn in assignments late and works with teachers to come up with a recovery plan if students must be out of class," says O'Bryan, who recently had a student suffering from a concussion and unable to do her work for about 2-3 weeks. "We came up with a plan for her and now she's back on track."

VHS Learning: The Gold Standard

Reflecting on his role as a VHS Learning instructor so far, O'Bryan says the experience has made him a better communicator with his students.

He's also more empathetic and focused on developing strong relationships with his pupils. "It takes work to create a relationship with the level of rapport that we have with one another," says O'Bryan. "I think I've gotten better at that in a short period of time."

In his 15 years of working with different virtual schools, O'Bryan says VHS Learning stands out from other online providers because of how it's set up, its robust course offerings and strong support for students and instructors alike.

"I sincerely think VHS Learning is the best program I've come across so far in terms of all the resources it offers and all the ways it makes me be the best version of myself as an online teacher," says O'Bryan. "It's the gold standard."