Computers in Classrooms

18 December 2007 Note that the special font used in this issue is Snowdrift, from http://www.free-fonts.com/font/snow.html.

In this special bumper Christmas edition …

Editorial

There is quite a lot of news from the UK, Europe, the USA and Africa, in this edition. We cover the Children's Plan, legal issues, funding and lots more, plus a few extended articles. It's up to nearly 30 pages now, to give you plenty to read and think about!

The next issue will be out in January. If you see anything good at BETT, why not email me suggesting a review, or even a thumbnail sketch? I can't offer you fortune, but lots of people read this newsletter. In the meantime, enjoy this, and have a good break.

If you're reading someone else's copy of this, why not subscribe in your own right? See the end of the newsletter to find out how.

News and views

The Children's Plan
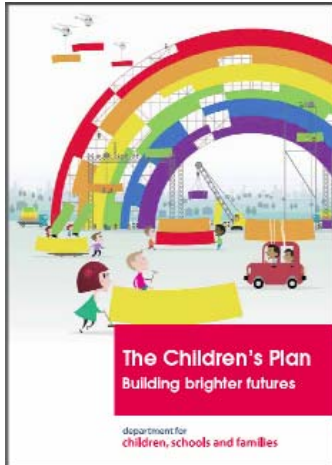
The big news in the UK last week, after a massive build up in the media, is the Children's Plan. I haven't had a chance to go through it in detail yet, but what it seems to do is draw together policies from all over the place – and not before time!

There's a healthy emphasis on technology, which is what one would expect given the focus on involving parents more in the children's education. It makes a good read and, from what I have read so far, is encouraging.

Download the document from here, and a summary of it from here.

The Byron Review, and the DCSF as a role model

I recently contributed my thoughts to the Tanya Byron review into children's views about the internet and video games – with 3 minutes to spare before the deadline! The good thing about the review was the fact that it actually asked children for their views – there was a special section for them. The not-so-good thing is that I sent two emails, and have so far received no response to either. The first email was offered the results of the survey I conducted (see the article in this newsletter). The other was my response to the consultation questions.

This lack of response is not confined to this consultation: I have **never** had a response, and I think this reflects very badly on the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). They should be acting as a role model in this regard, and even if they are all too busy, surely they could set up an autoresponse system?

I myself run surveys from time to time. There's the one I just mentioned, for instance, and another one, still "live", inviting people to tell me about their Web 2.0 projects. As a general rule, the following happens when you respond online:

> 1. You get redirected to a web page thanking you for your time, and suggesting other stuff you may be interested in.

> 2. If you have provided your email address and name, you receive a personalised email thanking you for your time.

How long did this take to set up? A grand total of 15 minutes: 5 to think about what I wanted to happen, 5 to set it all up and then 5 to test it all.

The BETT Show

Well, it is almost that time of year again. The BETT Show runs from January 9th to January 12th 2008, in Olympia, London. Each year it is bigger than the last, so I wonder how long it will be before it outgrows Olympia and needs to move to somewhere like the Excel Centre?

Anyway, there is enough to see to justify spending more than a day there. On the Wednesday there is always an announcement by the Education Secretary (or one of his or her colleagues). With any luck, this year he will not only announce funding, but it will actually be **new** funding. Somehow I doubt it though.

This year, also on the Wednesday, Miles Berry and I are giving a talk on the subject of Personalised Learning Through Technology. It's a great topic, and I hope you will be able to come along. (And if you do, be sure to say "hello" afterwards!).

Here's the blurb about it:

"This seminar will explore how ICT can contribute to a new experience of schooling, assessment for learning, pupils' ownership of learning, peer mentoring and parental engagement, thus fulfilling the aspirations of the Gilbert Report [on Personalised Learning]. The design of schools for the future will be discussed, as will possibilities for teachers' CPD. Provision for more radical interpretations of personalised learning will also be discussed. There will be practical examples of how technology such as Learning Platforms, VLEs, MISs, blogging, handheld devices and home computers are being used, and there will be lots of ideas for teachers to try out for themselves."

The seminar will take place on the Wednesday (ie 9th January) from 14:30 to 15:15, under the heading "Best Practice".

Miles and I gave a talk last year, on the topic of social technologies in the classroom, which was packed to capacity (over 250 people), so you could say that this is part of a comeback tour!

If you are going to BETT show I would highly recommend booking in advance and going along with a ticket you have printed off at home: it could save you a lot of time. To do so, why not click on one of the banner ads on the ICT in Education website (http://www.ictineducation.org), or the link here? That will enable me to earn a few pennies towards the upkeep of a wife and seven kids (they're not mine, but we're very close!).

The value of your learning network

Does the size of your "learning network" have value to a potential employer? A couple of people seem to think so, but I don't think they have fully thought it through. I've written quite a long article about it here.

What do **you** think?

Ofsted: common sense at last; well, maybe

Schools may soon face surprise inspections, ie with no notice at all. About time too. Any inspection regime which entails giving notice is (a) flawed and (b) even more stressful than it should be.

Teachers' unions and others have spoken out against the idea, but I think they are wrong. When I was Head of ICT in a secondary school, I ran my department as if we could be inspected any time at all. Far from being stressful, it was stress-free. After all, once you have systems in place, and you keep to them, everything works like clockwork.

It's important to implement the right systems, in the right way, of course, so as to ensure that all members of the team feel valued, and are both confident and competent.

And in any case, the only way anyone can **really** have confidence in an inspection is when it is a surprise one. When was the last time you heard of a restaurant being given notice of an inspection? (Subscribers to the Practical ICT eJournal may find the article Ten ways to always be ready for an ICT inspection useful.

The importance of ICT literacy

Lord Mitchell recently said:

"Not having IT skills will soon be as serious as not being able to read."

He was speaking specifically about the UK context, but what he said has been said by others, from other countries.

But are they right? Read the full article online.

Data protection consultation

Anyone concerned about the recent debacles in the UK in respect of the loss of data CDs may be interested in responding to a consultation about the effectiveness of the UK's Data Protection Act and related issues. The consultation was announced on 12th December, and the close date is not until the 15th February. Here is the link.

Advertorial

Practical ICT

Since launching Practical ICT back in September, there have been two issues, plus a special edition. The current issue looks at funding for educational technology in the UK, integrated learning systems, copyright issues concerning Google Docs and similar services, embedding the use of educational technology in the curriculum using concepts borrowed from economics and geography, and other items of interest.

The special edition looks in some depth at the recent inspection report about schools in the UK, and the lessons and implications for subject leaders of educational technology.

As I said last time, we started a Ning community for subscribers to Practical ICT, which is an e-journal that comes out at least 6 times a year. There are some interesting discussions going on at the moment, based on some previously-published "premium" articles (of which there are several hundred).

One of the most recent issues that came up was, what are the characteristics of outstanding ICT lessons? Read more about this in the article in this issue. Another issue has been the new 14-19 Diplomas.

Recent articles include one about the ideas of Jack Welch, and one about those of Abraham Maslow. These are part of a new series in which I look at the ideas of well-known business thinkers to see if anything of what they say could be used by leaders and managers of educational ICT.

If you already subscribe to this newsletter, to obtain a free sampler edition of the Practical ICT eJournal, or to sign up right away, simply log in and select Free Samples from the drop-down list. Again. that's all you need to do: no completing of forms or anything like that. Otherwise, pop over to http://terry-freedman.org.uk/amember/signup.php and take it from there. You can also order using an official purchase order. Email us at mailto:elaine@terry-freedman.org.uk to find out how. The cost is £18.00 plus VAT ($21.15 or approximately $42 in total).

Local Authority Funding

Details of Local Authority Children's Services Funding: 2008-09, 2009-10 & 2010-11 is now available.

There's a Word version of the data and an Excel version. I couldn't see anything specifically about ICT relevant to education, although there is a pot of money for mobile ICT for social workers.

Diplomas and other 14-19 issues

Nuffield has just published, on the 11th December, its 3rd paper about the 14-19 curriculum in the UK. This Issues Paper examines emerging forms of 14-19 partnership development in England and considers the question, "What are the main dimensions of a system of governance and organisation required to support inclusive, effective and future-orientated learning for all 14-19 year-olds?". I hope to comment on it soon for Practical ICT subscribers.

Does ICT make a difference? European findings

Fortunately, the answer overall appears to be "yes". In this blog post, Alyssa Joy P. Silva summarises the findings of the report, which has sections of interest to policy-makers as well as teachers.

I found this especially interesting:

"There is also evidence of changes in roles of teachers either forced by the technology itself or more actively steered by teachers. In changing the teacher-student relationship, as part of the new educational paradigm, the most difficult process for teachers is to give up control and have more trust in students planning their work independently."

"ICT In Schools: Trends, Innovations And Issues In 2006-2007" may be downloaded from here.

Zambia's commitment to ICT in schools

The Education ministry in Zambia is going all out to "digitize" its schools. Around 10% of all schools will be "done" over the next three years. Looking further ahead, the government aims to have all schools online by 2030. You can read the full story here.

Legal issues surrounding Web 2.0

A recent Think Tank highlighted the legal dangers of social networking, in the form of companies being sued over things their employees have said. I don't actually think this is a new problem, just an old one in a different form. As the article points out, a company can take some simple and sensible precautions, such as including a good Terms of Use policy.

I actually think **anyone** with a website or blog needs to have such a policy. Here is ours, which includes our privacy policy and conditions for contributors – to which I always refer would-be contributors. We also moderate comments to articles.

Thanks to Tim Tarrant for drawing my attention to EPIC.

Teachers' TV

Dayo Adeleke, of Teachers' TV, writes:

"Starting in the week beginning 7th January, the Teachers TV ICT Week will feature a range of programmes concerning ICT. During the promotional week we will be showcasing the latest technologies at the BETT show (see the item in this newsletter) and looking at inspirational uses of technology in schools at both primary and secondary levels. Also on Teachers TV we have

dedicated two hours of programming to the ICT workforce every Thursday at 5pm (Primary) & 6pm (Secondary). The programmes featured on the channel are available to stream and download online for free here."

I watched one, about the top 10 websites for ICT teachers, and it was very informative.

Classroom disruptions arising from computers

Computers and the internet provide a rich source of ways to disrupt lessons, and eSchool News has turned its attention to filtering and related issues. It has collated a range of articles from its archives, dealing with such things as acceptable use policies and the banning of mobile (cell) phones. You will discover the links to all these articles here.

Flashmeeting report

Last time I announced that there would be a meeting online using Flashmeeting. It was an interesting experience, especially during the time that none of us could hear what some others were saying! Not sure exactly what went wrong, but teacher and blogger Paul Harrington rescued the situation!

I've been investigating other such services, and will announce another meeting, using either Flashmeeting or one of the others, in due course.

In the context of this newsletter, such facilities are in the nature of a solution seeking a problem. However, when I was chairing the professional development committee of the K12 Online Conference recently, the use of an online meeting space came into its own. For that, we used one called Elluminate.

Useful websites for helping you manage your workload

Going back to the Flashmeeting meeting, the focus was supposed to be reducing teacher workload (and yes, I **am** aware of the irony of scheduling the event outside school hours!). As it happened, most of us were focused on the technical issues, and only Peggy George (who has contributed an article in this issue) took it seriously. She not only found some useful links, she sent me an email about it afterwards. Here is what she said:

This is my favourite quote related to technology and time management. 😃

A computer's efficiency decreases as the urgency of retrieval increases. ~ *Anonymous*

(My own favourite is **Westheimer's Rule**, which states:

To estimate the time it takes to do a task: estimate the time you think it should take, multiply by two, and change the unit of measure to the next highest unit. Thus we allocate two days for a one-hour task.

For more such rules, check out Rules of the Game.) Anyway, here are the links:

Trim Your Overworked Day

Productivity Resources for Managing Your Workload

Overcoming Procrastination

Tips on Handling Computer Stress and Frustration

Thanks, Peggy!

Prize draw winner

I ran a prize draw in the October issue, the prize being a free one year's subscription to the Practical ICT eJournal. The lucky winner was Roger Distil, who describes himself as

"Grumpy Old Teacher". Roger was delighted to win, and after a few weeks I asked him if the subscription had changed his life. Here's what he said:

 "I have one complaint about this subscription - there is **so** much to read! Terry is obviously a very busy man, with lots of different interests within his field. The articles and podcasts are fascinating, and it's always good to get someone else's perspective on a topic you think you know something about – it's all very thought-provoking and informative. Hints and tips, reviews and evaluations; I am sorry now that I didn't subscribe before. It's going to take me ages to get up to date, with all of the articles to catch up on.

Thanks, Terry, for this amazing collection of resources!"

Roger has been the Head of Computing/ICT for the past 22 years, currently at a comprehensive secondary school in Hertfordshire, England. He blogs and is also an ICT Consultant/Evaluator for Schoolzone.co.uk, and a huge Web 2.0 enthusiast, with a mission to bring new technologies into classrooms.

Upcoming podcasts

I am delighted to announce that Natalie Shukla, Producer of the Westminster Education Forum agreed to an interview. We recorded it via telephone, and the quality is surprisingly good.

As a general point, what is good about the Westminster Education Forum seminars is that you get to hear the views, experiences and, sometimes, research findings of a wide variety of experts in their fields. Apart from one or two keynote talks lasting around 20 minutes or so, the event is usually broken up into sessions involving a small panel addressing a particular theme. The format tends to be that each panel member speaks for around 3 or 4 minutes, and then the panel answers questions from the floor.

Fortunately, so far I have not had the experience of having my time wasted (in my opinion) by people who imagine that the sole purpose of having a 4 minute slot is to run an advertising campaign for their product or service (or, worst of all, themselves).

You can listen to my discussion with Natalie here. Note that in this newsletter there are two reports on recent seminars: the secondary curriculum and children's television.

Bah, humbug!

Last year I wrote an article called "The season of good swill", about those dreadful emails and letters some people send out at this time of year, detailing every minute aspect of their lives. "Swill" is very apt in this context, because its literal meaning is hogwash, and hogwash is used figuratively to mean utter drivel.

I could go on and on, but see no reason to spoil your day. Basically, if you want to inform all the people you haven't bothered to keep in touch with everything you have done in the past year, start a blog or something – anything – but please leave me alone!

You can read my original article, which contains several valid legal and educational points as well as a rant, and you can read a more recent rant over at the Technology and Learning blog.

Coming of Age

"Coming of Age: An Introduction to the New Worldwide Web" is a good introduction for teachers to using blogging, wikis, digital storytelling, digital photography and much, much more. The first edition was downloaded at least 60,000 times (I stopped monitoring after that) and is still available. You can find out all about it, and how to download it, from here:

http://www.ictineducation.org/db/web2.

There is another, even bigger version in the pipeline. When I say "bigger", I mean around 5 times the size of the original. This new version features nearly 60 contributors from around the world, some of whom are teenagers, with a pretty even split between female and male. Even with the kind assistance I am receiving from people, editing it is a mammoth task – especially as I also need to earn a living!

If you'd like to find out more about it, including how to be considered as a contributor for the next one, and be the first in line to get a copy when it comes out, subscribe to the Coming of Age newsletter. If you already subscribe to this newsletter (or any of our other subscriptions), just go to http://www.ictineducation.org/amember/member.php, log in, and add "Coming of Age" from the drop-down menu. That's it! But if you **don't** already subscribe to something (tut tut!), go to http://www.ictineducation.org/amember/signup.php and enter your details.

There is also a Coming of Age community at http://comingofage.ning.com, where we share details of videos and other stuff concerning Web 2.0. Unfortunately, there is not yet a way of integrating Ning community sites with other websites, which means that you have to sign up separately. The good news, though, is that it only takes a couple of minutes, because I do not ask for a lot of unnecessary information.

Why subscriptions?

The reason I've set up all these subscriptions, in the way I have, is to save people time. Under the previous system, you submitted a form to obtain free samples, then if you liked what you saw you would complete another form to subscribe. This way, it's the same form for everything, and as soon as you complete it once, your details are stored in a database, meaning you don't have to enter the information again.

K12 Online

In the last newsletter I said I would be revisiting the K12 On line Conference, and rather than

review lots of resources what I've done is to evaluate just one: the presentation by Sharon Peters and Vince Jansen. It is all about measuring professional development.

This is very timely. As I said in my presentation at the Training & Development Agency's recent conference on e-Portfolios, teachers and others are engaging in lots of what might be called "ad hoc" professional development, courtesy of Web 2.0 tools like Skype – but how do we "capture" the knowledge gained as a result, or measure its impact?

Website changes

I am hoping to make some changes to the ICT in Education website in the near future, to make it easier to find information. There is absolutely tons of stuff there, and organising it is quite a challenge! A good starting point is the yellow menu on the left-hand side of the website, and a good way of finding articles is to use the "Search this site" link in the yellow menu. You don't have to complete the date fields, by the way: just enter a keyword or phrase (inside quotation marks) and go for it.

I've recently added a link on the left-hand side of the page entitled "Today's tip about classroom display". This shows a different tip each day, selected at random from a collection of tips in a book I wrote called "A Practical Guide to the Importance of Display". The aim of this section of the website is twofold: to provide you with useful tips, and also to encourage you to buy the aforementioned book. Doing so should induce in you a good feeling as you bask in the knowledge that you will have made a modest contribution to my efforts to stave off starvation (cue violins).

Getting back to the website changes, I have created a new index page, ie home page. It is very skeletal, and contains only the links to the main website (to which it redirects you automatically after 10 seconds) and the latest 5 articles. I have to make haste slowly because the website is almost entirely template-driven, which means that if I make a terrible mistake the effects can be seen all over the place. So before each change I make a backup of the file I'm about to change, then I make the change, and then I test it. It all takes ages.

We have a new template lined up, and a new content management system. I just have to find the time to learn enough about style sheets to ensure it all hangs together properly. I thought I'd left all this stuff behind ten years ago! Oh well.

Nude pics cause a stir

A recent story in the English press concerned a teacher's nude photos of herself. I don't wish to mention the school because I think the teachers concerned have probably been embarrassed enough, but the story is basically as follows.

A teacher lent a student her mobile phone. The student looked through the phone and discovered the nude photo, which he then circulated to his friends. The last thing I heard was that the powers-that-be in the school were considering what action to take.

Now, a few things come to mind about this incident. I think the teacher was not well-advised to keep such a photo on her phone, but sometimes it is not possible to send the photo to a computer (you need either a particular contract or a means of connecting the phone to a computer).

But what **really** shocked me is that nobody in the school appears to have condemned the actions of the student – it was left to a parent to do that. So here we have a situation in which a student abuses the generosity of his teacher, invades her privacy, and probably commits a crime (data theft), and the reaction of the school authorities is to consider how to reprimand the teacher. Astonishing.

All change in England and Wales: the new secondary curriculum

On the 22nd November 2007 I attended a seminar called "Secondary Curriculum – Evolution and Innovation". You will note from the full agenda that educational ICT was not a particular focus of the event, which was more general in scope. But I think there are lessons that the ICT teacher can learn from what was said.

The seminar

It would be impossible, and not especially useful, for me to try and summarise the entire proceedings, which lasted around 5 hours from start to finish. So what I will do instead is take a few key points and hope that you find one or two of them useful, and interesting enough to follow up on.

The key changes, and why

The first point to note is that the secondary curriculum in England has changed, as I reported on in a previous article.

Gareth Mills (pictured), Head of Curriculum Development and Implementation, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, pointed out that the new curriculum is predicated on the following questions:

- What are we trying to achieve?

- What is the best way to organise learning?
- What is the evidence of impact?

The watchword of the new curriculum is "flexibility", but the interesting thing for me is that the current curriculum is not inflexible. The key elements of the curriculum are the Programme of Study and Level Descriptors for each subject, and these are pretty thin, and contain no rulings on how to achieve the aims contained within them. That's why I find myself slightly bristling when people talk about the straitjacket of the curriculum, and how it doesn't allow anyone to be creative.

I am not quite sure why the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is perceived as being to blame for the general lack of innovation in the delivery of the curriculum. Even Dr Martin Stephen, High Master of St Paul's School in London, England, expressed the view that the National Curriculum is failing the best pupils. He also said, in response to my challenging him on this, that league tables have a lot to answer for, being a "canker on the face of education" because it leads to such fear on the part of teachers.

I couldn't agree more, and have said as much in response to various blog posts in which the writer takes teachers to task for not being more innovative. It's hard to be innovative if you have one eye on examination results which will be taken out of context and placed in a meaningless comparison table with those of other, often quite disparate, schools.

In science, in particular, Dr Stephen said that the standards expected by the National Curriculum are too low. I'm not sure I would agree that that is the case with ICT.

(Mind you, having said that, I think there might have been more emphasis on control technology and programming. My feeling is that because these are perceived as being difficult, and often not done terribly well, they have been played down somewhat. I'd be interested to hear your opinions on this.)

You can see the new secondary curriculum online. Follow the links and look at the new Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 Programmes of Study, and see what **you** think: **are** the standards too low? For more information, including some of the background, please see the section called "Changes".

The timescale: is it adequate?

The curriculum is intended to be rolled out over a 4 year period, and that is at the same time as other developments, notably the introduction of Diplomas and the proposed raising of the effective school leaving age to 18.

Of course, the question arises as to why so many things have been announced at once, and whether four years is long enough to implement the changes. According to Gareth, the answer to the first is to enable schools to plan ahead in an holistic way rather than in a piecemeal way.

Professor Derek Bell, Chief Executive of the Association for Science Education, expressed doubt about whether 4 years is long enough. In natural systems, in normal circumstances, he said, periods of growth are followed by periods of consolidation.

This has certainly not been the case in the UK. I once calculated that there had been a new education policy initiative an average of every two weeks!

The importance of teacher expertise

A knowledge and understanding of the curriculum and the related matter of Attainment Targets are of paramount importance, of course, so there are training implications that, if you are the subject leader for ICT in your school, you will need to think about. But do also bear in mind the point about flexibility: you **can** experiment with different ways of doing things,

perhaps using some of the newer tools available like blogs and wikis. (For lots of ideas on using Web 2.0 in education, see the free ebook "Coming of Age: An Introduction to the NEW Worldwide Web", in which educators from around the world give the benefit of their experience. The first edition is available, and the second edition is well under way. Details online.

The quality of the teaching force is also important. Dr Stephen says that we should select the brightest and the best. He drew attention to the work of Michael Barber, who has stated that the top areas for education, Finland, Singapore, South Korea and Alberta, Canada, all select their teachers from the top third of their college graduates.

Liz Francis, of the Training & Development Agency for Schools, said that Continuing Professional Development, in both pedagogy and subject knowledge, is of paramount importance, and that the lecture-type model of CPD was not as effective as more collaborative approaches.

She also drew attention to the new standards for teachers, and in particular C8, which states that:

"[teachers should] have a creative and constructively critical approach to innovation."

 Note that that applies to all teachers, not just the ones currently being trained. You can view the Standards in their entirety on the internet.

In addition, both she and Jane Joyner, from Ofsted, made the critically important point that teachers need to be subject experts in order to be able to challenge students' misconceptions.

Thank goodness **someone** has said that! For some years now there has been a substantial number of people, at least in the UK, who do not believe that ICT is a real subject. Their argument, that ICT is a set of tools to be used in the service of other subjects, makes sense up to a point. However, by denying the legitimacy of ICT to exist as a subject in its own right, they also deny the existence of ICT expertise in what I suppose might be called an "academic" sense. Or at least, they dismiss the value of ICT expertise by referring to the people who possess it as "geeks", or by implying that they are.

But surely that is the point? If a geek is someone with technical expertise, then that is exactly what the teaching profession needs.

Assessment for learning

I am a great believer in using assessment for learning (see the review of "ICT: Inside the black box" by Web and Cox, in the January 2008 edition of this newsletter). Thus it was disappointing to learn from Tim Oates, Group Director, Assessment Research & Development, Cambridge Assessment, that Black and Wiliams' experimental work in Medway and Oxford did not yield the gains in attainment which were anticipated. (The original international comparative work which they had undertaken suggested significant improvements in GCSE attainment would be obtained.)

The reasons for this are not clear at present, but there is a strong suspicion that the general "performativity" culture of narrow teaching to tests is more insidiously entrenched in the system than might previously have been supposed, and detracts from the gains which could potentially be delivered by assessment for learning. Black and Williams, as you may know, introduced the concept of Assessment for Learning in their seminal "Inside the Black Box".

Dr Justine Frain, Vice President of Global Community Partnerships, GlaxoSmithKline, mentioned the fact that in the Science and Engineering community, some workers act as

"ambassadors" for their area of expertise. They go into schools, giving talks and leading activities. You can find out more online.

I think this is an excellent concept, and would work well for ICT, especially given the ongoing concerns about the paucity of people entering IT-related jobs (see Is there a skills gap in the UK?) and the gender gap (see A gender item, which although about 18 months old is not different to what prevails today.

Unfortunately, in a casual email exchange between myself and Tim Tarrant, of the Training and Development Agency, Tim indicates that he believes that a similar scheme for ICT does not exist. A pity, because practitioners could, I feel, bring life to the subject. At the very least, they might bring new examples of concepts such as modelling, where that of the school tuck shop must surely have reached its use-by date by now.

Changes

Gareth Mills kindly sent me a copy of his talk in order to enable me to provide more background information about the aims of the new curriculum, and related matters. The following has been based on extracts from that document.

A curriculum fit for the future cannot remain static. An important challenge for us is to develop a framework that will allow the curriculum to evolve over time as a dynamic framework.

Another important challenge is about ownership: how do we shift from a view of "**the**" National Curriculum to "**our**" curriculum - a curriculum that can be shaped to fit local circumstances and priorities while maintaining a national entitlement?

The QCA has created a set of statutory aims for the curriculum, so we now have clear aims that seek to underpin the rational for the whole curriculum. We want all learners to be successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve, confident individuals who are able to live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives and responsible citizens who make a positive contribution to society.

Imagine if you were designing a curriculum from scratch. If you started with a blank piece of paper you might begin by asking, "What are we trying to achieve through education?" or "What does success look like?" This is a completely different starting place than seeing curriculum design as the job of fitting eleven subjects into a 25-hour a week timetable.

We have taken a new look at **subjects**. Now that there are clear aims, when we talk about subjects we see them directly contributing to the achievement of the aims.

There is a new framework for **skills**. This outlines the functional skills of literacy, number and ICT but also describes a set personal learning and thinking skills.

The new curriculum also foregrounds **personal development** - the social and emotional aspects of learning and economic and financial well-being.

Finally there is an aspect of the new curriculum that we call cross-curricular **Dimensions**. These reflect the major themes and challenges faced by society and individuals. They are themes that should permeate the curriculum as a way of bringing relevance to learning. The themes include things such as identity and diversity, enterprise, sustainability and healthy lifestyles.

We are not asking school to "**deliver**" a centralist curriculum but to spent time improving the design of their own curriculum within the national framework.

We are saying you have got a year to think and engage with the new ideas. The following year schools will be expected to implement the new curriculum with Year 7 pupils. And in subsequent years implement it with Year 8 and Year 9. With the introduction of a new suite of diploma schools will be able to offer far more choices to learners. Now schools will want think holistically about their offer, but this is a period of development, piloting and trialling and it is being supported by national workshops.

Conclusions

In conclusion, what can the ICT teacher or subject leader do in order to raise standards in ICT? I would suggest the following:

- Ensure that all members of the ICT team are familiar with the curriculum, not only in terms of the nuts and bolts of the Programmes of Study but also in terms of its aims and underlying philosophy.
- Dare to be different. Study the case studies and, if necessary, run a small pilot project as a test bed for new ideas. (There is a technique to selecting students or groups for a pilot study, and I will be delving into this in a different article.)
- Devise a sound programme of professional development, to ensure that your team members are completely on top of their craft, both in terms of subject matter and pedagogy.
- Use assessment for learning as a natural component of the delivery of the subject.
- Where possible, forge partnerships, or at least relationships, with local "real world" experts. Remember, they do not have to be big companies: even local writers sometimes use ICT in their daily lives!
- Use the guidance available: the QCA, TDA and Ofsted all produce excellence advice in the forms of (for example) case studies, reports or frequently-asked questions.

What do you think of the ideas discussed in this article? Join the discussion at http://ictineducation.ning.com.

I should like to thank everyone quoted in this article, and especially Natalie Shukla, Justine Frain, Tim Oates, Derek Bell and Gareth Mills for their assistance.

Just how much knowledge should a teacher have?

By Fiona Aubrey-Smith
Those philosophers amongst us may spend a great deal of time and energy discussing this question, but teachers such as myself would probably answer with a wry smile "more knowledge than we have now!"

That indeed, is reason alone to engender a bit of team spirit in the principles of facilitating learning. If we teachers have mastered the knack of engaging our class, and can rustle up enough open and higher order questions to engender a sense of enquiry amongst our charges, then perhaps we ought to share out the task of enabling students to discover answers.

Every person in the world is filled with knowledge and skills of different varieties. How can we encourage people to share this vast wealth of understanding, and really begin to learn from each other? Knowledge and understanding are not learned in isolation. As our access to information grows, and our knowledge resource pool expands exponentially, as individuals we will simply never catch up with it – and why should we? What purpose would that serve?

The value of collaboration

However, in collaboration, we can achieve much more. If little Lily wants to learn about tigers, who can help her really understand; the zookeeper who works with tigers, or me, her teacher who just had a swift glance through Google's finest?! As Lily's teacher, I cannot

possibly know all the answers to the questions she will ask, but it is most definitely my responsibility to equip her with the thirst, skills and opportunities to be able to find out.

My last school was situated right in the middle of a Royal Armed Forces housing estate, so children came to school with a knowledge of the Navy unlike an average 4 year old. This authentic knowledge and understanding formed a brilliant foundation for a project-driven curriculum, and thus we began a project entitled "In the Navy" with a goal of creating a children's guide to the Royal Navy. We started this project by using a forum on our Learning Platform to record all the ideas that we wanted to explore. We created a huge list of questions and found ourselves with a two fold problem. Who could answer our wide range of questions, and how could the children easily and clearly share their findings when they were only just beginning to read and write to a standard accessible by others. We were not content with recording our findings merely for the purposes of teacher assessment and classroom display as is so often the case; we wanted a real audience.

Experts wanted

Given that the school's catchment housed a large number of Navy personnel, we asked for volunteers who would become our Navy experts, and two of these personnel were fathers actively serving aboard ships. These fathers came into school to meet the children making this link more concrete and generating some exciting cross-curricular activities and classroom display, but the real success came later. Year 1 and 2 children learned how to post new questions upon a Learning Platform forum, often delighting in changing their text font, colour and size (spot the ICT NC skills coverage…), and then were both excited and enthralled when their questions received responses from the experts they had recently met.

Our Navy experts were able to access our question forum via our Learning Platform whilst on active service aboard their ship hundreds of miles away, and we were particularly excited when these responses came with explanatory images, sound or photographs. This E-Pal relationship continued as these fathers travelled aboard their ships, and the children were soon engaged in mapping their routes upon classroom map displays and using Google maps.

HMS Manchester (pictured) was one of the ships with which this relationship took place.

Motivation

During the project children gathered information about the Navy, and began to create Talking Books and labelled e-pictures which shared their findings. Thus, we had a children's guide to the Navy without over-dependence on reading and writing although you'll spot the obvious links to a whole host of curriculum areas.

All of the children, particularly boys, were enormously motivated and engaged by this approach, and as a rather unexpected consequence, we soon found that boys in particular were making swift and comprehensive progress in their reading; I remember one particular little boy whose metaphorical 'Reading Light' was well and truly switched on as a direct result of this collaborative project; he was captivated by the conversations that he could have with a man hundreds of miles away in the middle of the sea. Now I could wax lyrical about the impact on children's engagement, motivation, achievement and sheer excitement through approaches like this, but better still would be to give you a few ideas so that you can try it out for yourself and see what I mean.

Using your locality

Every school is unique and has something about it which could prompt localised projects; whether this is the school building, local area, trends of employment, historical connections or

something entirely different, there will be some distinctive feature. This feature will by default bring expertise with it; if your school is in the middle of an agricultural area, then you will have a range of farming expertise in your locality.

If your school is in the middle of Winchester then you have a wealth of English history surrounding you. Schools in West Berkshire for example have been working with local illustrators to learn from their expertise in order to create specific illustrated projects, schools in Beijing have been focusing on the Olympians as role models; their ideals and achievements. Clearwater Bay School in Hong Kong has been working on a collaborative project with an interior designer and architect to plan, create, deliver, reflect and improve upon a shared design brief. The realms of possibility are vast.

Getting started

So how do we start? Perhaps a useful and informative activity is to ask families to complete a survey; maybe under the guise of a "Our Families" topic, finding out what skills family members believe they have and if they'd like to share these within your school. Some time ago a little boy from Early Years class described with great excitement how his daddy helped pop stars make records. His father later came into school and voluntarily captured the school singing Christmas carols for a CD that we later sold at the Christmas Fayre.

The next step here of course is this same daddy working with children to capture their sounds for a shared family soundtrack; maybe for a family "HomeSpace" as they are increasingly becoming known. This same survey also revealed a father who was a restaurant manager who then kindly agreed to come into school to teach children how to cook simple food; the next step here is sharing photographs of the children having made these at home, with space for children and families to feedback how it went, asking for advice for future culinary activities and sharing healthy recipes a la Jamie Oliver!

When you've collected your survey information about skills which family members have (including grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts) then is the time when you'll find that housed around your school are experts and skills which really can add value to your curriculum. Most families want to support their children, and I believe, from what I've seen, really delight in being given the opportunity to contribute their skills and knowledge to not only their own child, but to their child's class. Children themselves become very excited by the relationships which they build up, and of course these have the potential to become lifelong relationships between children's families. You're therefore potentially building communities of people who are able to support each other's lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The question is not if this will work; it does – all over the world. The real question is; are you prepared to share your expertise in facilitating learning opportunities, with subject expertise held by your school community?

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"The wisest man is he who realises that he knows nothing at all" Socrates

Social networking from a teen's perspective

Are teens as wet behind the ears as we seem to think? Are we perhaps being so cautious in our approach to protecting kids online that we are losing out on some of the educational benefits of social networking?

I wrote an article about this [recently](), since when I have acquired more results. Over 500 children have now taken part. I hope to update the article soon, but in essence nothing has changed. Here are some highlights from the survey:

Have you met any of your online friends in real life?	No	%
No.	329	70%
Yes, I went with an adult and met them in a public place	10	2%
Yes, I went with a friend and met them in a public place	0	0%
Yes, I met them in a public place on my own	41	9%
Yes, but I didn't take any safety precautions	15	3%
Other	74	16%

Do you create or upload stuff to the internet, eg photos?

Yes	346
No	90
Occasionally	126

Reasons for belonging to a social network
I gave the pupils the following responses to choose from, and asked them to select one as their top reason, then one as their next best reason, and then one as their third best reason.

Options	Result 1	Result 2
Discover new music		
Do homework together with friends	Most popular #3 reason	2nd most-cited reason
Keep in touch with friends		
Learn new things	Most popular #1 reason	Most cited reason
Meet new people with similar interests		
Play games	Most popular #2 reason	3rd most-cited reason
Share photos/videos/music		

This chimes with the findings from other surveys.

There is a lot of concern about safety on the internet. Do you think the concern is justified?		
Yes, but it's not as scary as people think	256	50%
Yes, definitely	122	24%
Not sure	109	21%
Not at all	0	0%

Other	27	5%

What do teenagers themselves recommend?

I asked the teens to select the best, 2nd best and 3rd best recommendation from the following options:

Here is what they said:

The top 1st recommendation was:

Leave us kids alone: we know what we're were doing
The 2nd recommendation was:

Let us use social networking, but under supervision

The 3rd recommendation was:

Use social networking as part of the curriculum

The most frequently cited 3 recommendations overall were:

1. Let us use social networking, but under supervision

2. Leave us kids alone: we know what we're were doing

3. Give lessons in keeping safe online

Conclusions and recommendations

These arise from my own survey and other sources.

1. Teens are not as savvy as they and we might think. They are not able to fully assess risk, and even when they do assess risk they don't necessarily behave accordingly. Therefore schools should do more than scaremongering or reading the riot act. They should:

- Provide teenagers with practical strategies to help them avoid giving away private information.

- Encourage the use of social networking sites in school in order to train students in their proper use.

- Ensure that students fully understand that it is not easy to delete all traces of oneself from a community, because of comments left on other people's blogs or profiles.

- Encourage teachers to join online communities for the purpose of CPD. The school could even have its own Ning community, or similar, for the exchanging of ideas and resources, and for virtual staff meetings. Taking part in an online community would help teachers to understand their students' experience.

2. Teenagers use social networking sites and similar Social networking sites in order to do school-related work. Therefore it may be a good idea to encourage popular social networking sites to provide easily accessible resources that students could make use of.

3. Encourage social networking sites to make deletion of personal data a one-click operation, or as near to that as possible.

Save Kids' TV

Terry Freedman reports on a recent seminar on the subject of Children's TV Programming.

Perhaps it's just me, but I think there is a tendency for those of us involved in educational technology matters sometimes to forget that children watch **broadcast television** too.

Last week I attended a Westminster Media Forum event on the future of Children's TV programming in the UK. Whilst I have not had enough time to cogitate fully on the information received, I thought I'd report on it anyway because there is a consultation in progress, the deadline for which is the 20th of December.

The picture for the future is not good, for several reasons. But first, allow me to define "not good". Although there is plenty of programmes for children around, my understanding is that new, home-grown, programmes are declining as a proportion of total programmes.

Does this matter? Well, from a cultural point of view, I think it does. But, you may say, surely all kids just access the internet these days anyway? Well, apparently not. Or not exclusively at any rate. According to a research report by Ofcom, "The Future of Children's Television Programming", usage of the internet increases with age, and the reasons for its use changes. But television viewing still accounts for nearly 16 hours a week on average across all the age groups. Goodness knows where they find the time, because in total they are spending double that on all media.

So why is this happening? There appears to be two main factors. One is opportunity cost. In terms of revenue opportunities, a one hour slot is, other things being equal, much more valuable if it is used to screen "grown-up" programmes (I hesitate to use the term "adult" because of its other connotations).

There is a general perception that a very large contributory factor here is the Government's restrictions on food advertising during children's television programmes (no advertising = no revenue). However, Peter Phillips, of the Strategy and Market Developments division in Ofcom, maintains that this is **not** the main reason. In his presentation, he stated that the decline started 6 years before the law was changed.

The other main factor is fragmentation, which manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, there is fragmentation across channels: there are now around 25 dedicated children's TV channels available in the UK. Secondly, there is fragmentation across other media, such as DVDs, videos, mobile phones and the internet (via phones and computers).

If you think about it, this is a manifestation of the so-called "long tail" phenomenon – which, like many things, comes with unforeseen and unwelcome consequences.

One of the ways in which some companies are "fighting back" is by making their output available on a variety of media. This is known in the trade as "360 degree commissioning": producing short episodes that can go out on the net. However, as Jo Hodder, Chair of the Educational Writers' Group of the UK's Society of Authors points out:

"You have to have the programmes there to start with, and if children can't watch decent TV how can you build an audience?"

Also in this regard it should be remembered that not everyone has access to digital television, and the full change to digital TV does not happen until 2012. Of the mainstream television companies, as far as I can tell the only ones with a burning commitment to children's TV programming are the BBC and Channel 5, whilst ITV seems concerned primarily with ratings.

Jo Hodder feels quite strongly. She says:

"It is time for the Government to seriously review the situation. Swift action needs to be taken before a whole industry and audience is lost. Children deserve the best indigenous quality programming that informs and entertains as well as reflects their hopes and aspirations. We often talk about diversity, but we are denying a social group a voice – particularly older children for whom little is aired. Programming should be accessible on terrestrial channels, be in every home, and not be restricted to digital."

So why does any of this concern **us**, ie the people involved with educational ICT? I would suggest it concerns us in two main ways.

Firstly, there is some good stuff out there. For example, have a look at Nickelodeon's anti-bullying videos here (click on the picture labelled "Help us stop bullying now!"). This was shown at the seminar, and is one of the best such programmes I've seen.

Secondly, as was pointed out in the seminar, we need to be concerned with more than just internet literacy or digital literacy. From the children's point of view, there are simply different types of media, so we should, perhaps, be addressing "media literacy" in its widest sense.

Incidentally, for those of us who write, and take a pride in our writing, it's worth bearing in mind that good quality television programmes ultimately stem from excellent writing. There is a certain snobbery against TV by some authors, but this is often misplaced.

So what can you do about? You have a number of options:

1. Go to the relevant section of the Ofcom website, read the documentation, and respond to the consultation – by the 20th, as I've said.

2. Go to the Save Kids TV website, read their proposals and, if you agree with their concerns, sign the e-petition.

3. Go to the PACT website, enter your postcode, and a letter will magically appear for you approve and then send electronically.

Now, the signing of petitions is open only to UK residents, but I think non-Brits will find the documents interesting anyway. Also, what is the situation in **your** country?

If you have any views on this, let me know, or join us at http://ictineducation.ning.com and post your thoughts there.

Thanks to Jo Hodder for providing information for this article.

The Personal Optimized Learning Environment

Accrediting and evaluating professional development is an issue. Sharon Peters and Vincent Jansen suggest an approach to dealing with the issue.

They have developed a prototype approach called Personal Optimized Learning Environment (POLE). I have to say at this juncture that I hate the current predilection for creating acronyms at every available opportunity, and I also think that this particular acronym is unfortunate. It has other connotations (pole dancing, up the pole) which perhaps one would wish to avoid.

How about the approach itself? It seems quite promising to me. The concept of a dashboard is discussed. Your car dashboard gives you a whole wealth of at-a-glance information. Whilst the information is not in itself evaluative, it is detailed enough to enable you to make your own evaluations.

I suppose that a simple example of this would be fuel consumption. If your dashboard indicates that you will probably run out of fuel in the next 10 miles, you may decide to reduce your speed until you can top up.

In other words, the POLE approach is all about metrics. You provide information, and it is collated and summarised, graphically, for you. Well, as I have said in other contexts, such as in my work with schools on managing their technical support, sensible metrics are good.

The concept is sound, although I am not totally convinced by its execution. I think I would need to play with it for a while to see whether it's as arduous as it looks on the screen. I know that the main reason that I personally am very bad at collating my professional development

experiences is that I never have time. In the end, I rely on the fact that every professional development opportunity I have attended will be recorded in my diary.

What I **don't** record is the sort of ad hoc professional development experienced when, for example, you end up having a completely unplanned, and extremely fruitful, discussion via Skype just because someone you know happens to be online at the same time as you are. If I could get round to it, a simple word processed document would probably be all I need, at least as a starting point. While that wouldn't achieve the same sort of in-depth view that POLE affords, it would have the merit of being simple and quick to use. Unless POLE has a quick default section, I am not sure it will be used as extensively as it might.

The presenters, Sharon Peters and Vince Jansen, make the extremely valid point that much professional development is lost from the institution's perspective. Like Peters, I have **never** been asked to give feedback to my colleagues on what I've learnt on a course. I always have, to my immediate co-workers at least, and have implemented what I have learnt (where appropriate). But not only have I never been asked to, my offers to feedback have not been taken up.

I have to say that I think a failure to insist on such feedback is not only to demean the value of professional development but to show a disregard to the issue of getting value for money. When school administrations need to tighten their belts, they often restrict the number of courses teachers can attend in a very blunt sort of way. What they **should** do in my opinion is take a cost-benefit approach. This is where, in the longer term, something like POLE would come in, because it would enable the **benefits** to be measured (although translating the results into monetary terms could be a challenge.)

Anyway, take a look at the video, which lasts around 20 minutes, and judge POLE for yourself.

Features of outstanding ICT lessons

Teresa Gold, head of ICT/Business Studies/Design Technology in an English secondary school, posted a message in the Practical ICT community asking what we thought were the characteristics of outstanding ICT lessons. Note the term "outstanding": not merely "good", or "competent" or, to use Ofsted-speak, "satisfactory", but "outstanding". A couple of us responded.

Dai Barnes suggests the following:

- Students working on the edge of their skills. Applying what they know and have learned and finding out new things by experimenting.

- Noise - students love to show off their achievements and in a class of twenty or more this isn't easy. I always think it is a good sign when classroom code of conduct is deliberately ignored to check out what the student over there is making such a big fuss about.

- Shouts of YES from the other side of the room.

- Engaged as a class. All working energetically toward a similar goal in different ways sharing their skills.

- The chatter about the lesson activities on the way out the door.

- The annoying interruption to the start of the lesson when a 12 year old begs me to look at the independent extension exercise they did at home after downloading the open source application and working hard without being told to.

- Seeing how some quietly apply thought and care to their end product realising the infinite world of design is at their fingertips and trying to be faithful to some design deity their lives have led them to believe exists.

- Someone telling me there is a better way of doing something than the way I told them.

- Someone asking questions across a room that they answer before I get to their machine.

- When all that is fake has left the room and the students want more.

- The grace and care students tend to exude when criticising/suggesting improvements about a classmates work.

I'm not answering your question am I? The screens are key in our subject. The students can see what their neighbours are up to. I don't mind about copying because doing is creating, creating is learning and so on.

I'll try another tack.

Signals that outstanding work is going on:

- Jim helps Jasmine because he has the skills and learns new ones by helping her (strict rule when helping (that I wish I could stick to) without using his hands) encouraging the interpersonal ICT skills of the future.

- The teacher saying little but "so, what would you do to fix that?" , "what would you choose?" , "is that the best colour/image/word/font?" , "why didn't that work?"

- Students smiling or nodding or looking focussed.

- A lot of marking that is accessed on a computer and is not very much like any other subject I have come across.

- Students being clearly aware of procedure without being reminded.

- The teachers voice is the light of the lighthouse - somehow the students are listening even when working to the brief/flash of intervention or guidance (boys multi-tasking).

- Praise. Students praising each other. Teacher praising students. Students praising teacher (sometimes).

Terry's suggestions

Now here are my ideas, which I wrote independently of Dai. They are phrased differently, and have a somewhat different focus on the whole, but I think you will find similarities.

- The lesson forms part of a unit which forms part of a scheme of work. There is a good starter activity, one that gets the pupils settled down and in the right frame of mind to do the work the teacher has planned for them.

- The teacher spends time at the start letting pupils into the secret of what the objectives (intended learning outcomes) of the lesson are, ie what is intended to be achieved by the end, and how this lesson fits in with the preceding and following lessons

- Pupils are given open-ended tasks (as far as possible), or at least not tasks with a glass ceiling. (Even lessons designed to impart a set of skills can still be more interesting than "drill & practice").

- There are plenty of resources for the pupils to use, enabling the teacher to give **quality** guidance, ie not confined to explaining how to save the document! Such resources will

include "how to" guides and posters, on-screen help (which the pupils will have been taught how to use), and each other.

- Ample time is allowed for the plenary, thereby allowing it to be somewhat more useful than the POLO model: Print Out and Log Off. The plenary is an **essential** part of the lesson, used to check what learning has taken place, consolidate learning, and prepare pupils for the next stage. In fact, a lesson might have two or three plenaries rather than just one at the end.

- Homework is set in order to consolidate and extend the pupils' understanding of the work they have been doing in lessons.

- Pupils are given plenty of time on the computers, with the teacher helping individuals and small groups.

- Work is set at an appropriate standard, taking into account the pupils' prior learning and attainment, and what is expected of their age group in terms of national standards.

- There is a lot of questioning – **probing** questioning – and assessment for learning techniques are in evidence.

- There is a good range of material to provide for differentiation (higher attainers and children with special educational needs) and personalised learning.

- The teacher is aware of individual pupils' needs, such as their individual education plans – and makes use of the assessment and other data she has – remember: data only becomes information if you **do** something with it!

- Not all work takes place at the computer: there is ample opportunity for discussion and reflection. What is important is not the use of technology *per se*, but the **appropriate** use of technology.

- Pupils respect the equipment and the room. For example, they do not leave discarded print-outs on the floor.

- Pupils are happy and confident enough to try out things which the teacher has not actually shown them: they ask help from each other or look at the posters and manuals that are available for them.

- Pupils keep looking at the clock on the wall, because they want to get to a certain point in their work before the end of the lesson. They have a sense of urgency.

- Pupils want to work at lunchtime and other non-lesson times.

- Pupils want to show off little tricks they have discovered, such as keyboard shortcuts.

- Pupils ask questions that the teacher is unable to answer.

I think the interesting thing about Dai's list and mine is that we each decided to include criteria which are not easy to measure objectively, but which are not trivial. I really like Dai's list. I considered integrating the two lists (well, three, because Dai created two), but something was lost, so I have merely merged them one after the other.

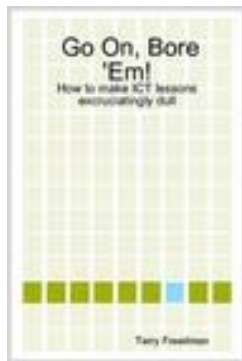So, what do **you** think? Please add your own points on our wiki.

Dai Barnes is Head of the ICT Department in discrete teaching, and leads teachers (sometimes by the nose) in cross-curricular ICT and has the wonderful responsibility of training teachers in the use of IT. He works with ActivStudio and Moodle mainly. Also, he has been asked to write a paper on blogging for Becta with an English teacher who is doing her thesis on digital literacy assessment.

An educational computing conference with a difference

Terry Freedman reports on a conference in the USA he attended and at which he presented.

"Help! I don't even know how to begin!"

The plaintive cry of someone confronted with the latest interactive video game? The heart-felt whimpering of someone who has just been given a critical assignment by their boss (just as he's leaving for the golf course)? Not exactly. What you've just read is a description of how yours truly felt when looking at the programme for this year's National Educational Computing Conference (NECC) in the USA.

A matter of size

Like a lot of educationalists I go to quite a few conferences, mostly in the UK. These conferences vary in size and content, of course, but the largest I've been to had around 700 delegates – unless you count the exhibition-cum-conference known as the BETT show, which is held in the second week of January each year. That attracts several thousand people from all over Britain and around the world. But in terms of a residential conference, NECC beats them all hands down.

So, before getting into the detail of the conference, let me try to paint a picture. The conference programme itself is not for the faint-hearted, because the choice, at least at first sight, is almost overwhelming. There are literally hundreds of alternative presentations you could attend all at the same time (known as "parallel" sessions). And that's not counting all the other things you could be doing, like hanging out in one of the watering holes, or indulging in an off-the-cuff presentation (I'll come back to that in a moment), wandering around the local area or lying down in a darkened room.

The number of delegates is pretty staggering: over 13,500. To put that into some kind of perspective, that's over 19 times the size of the largest English conference I've attended.

Why attend?

But this isn't a numbers game. It's not easy for teachers and other educationalists to get time off to attend a conference. What's more, it happens in June, ie pretty much at the tail end of a long school year. So why do people go?

Like any conference, there's a mixture of motives. Some people want to find out what the latest thinking is on a particular topic. Or maybe you want to bone up on your presentation skills. Finding out – and trying out – the latest hot products is a good reason to be there too (the exhibition hall is, as you might expect, massive). And, of course, there is the biggest reason of all: networking. Of the human kind, that is.

Ease of communication at NECC was certainly not an issue, with both online and face-to-face meetings catered for. So, what lessons can be learnt for both conference organisers and conference delegates?

A simple idea to facilitate networking

Think "conference", think "IT", and you're inevitably led to think "wireless". But online access is just one aspect of communication. Necessary, one might say, but not sufficient. But how do you facilitate real life conversation in a sea of 13,000+ delegates? The answer, or one of the answers, perhaps surprisingly, was a bloggers' café.

This turned out to be something of a misnomer: it wasn't a café. In fact, it wasn't anything, except a few dozen easy chairs and a few high tables with stools – and plenty of sockets. But it was this unprepossessing space that rapidly grew into **the** place to be.

Meaning what, exactly?

Well, on a fairly basic level, it became apparent very quickly that if there was someone you wanted to meet up with, perhaps someone whose blog you've been reading for a while, you'd stand a reasonably good chance of seeing them if you made a point of being there now and then. That is quite some achievement, given the kind of numbers I mentioned earlier.

Throughout the conference there was wireless internet access, not just in the corridors but in the rooms too. This was taken advantage of by people in sessions in a new way. As well as blogging about the session (a practice known as "live blogging"), people communicated with others in the session via Skype and Twitter.

I didn't even avail myself of **all** the facilities. There were two possibilities that I thought were conceptually quite outstanding. One was the invitation to set up meetings of like-minded people, outside of the formal sessions but away from the informal setting of the bloggers' cafe. The other was the dotting around the conference centre of a number of interactive whiteboards and clusters of chairs. They were there for anybody's use: you could just come along, plug your laptop in, and start waxing lyrical about something or demonstrating how to use a wiki, and address the gathering crowd. A little like a miniature version of London's Speakers' Corner, what a great way of allowing spontaneity to happen.

For me, the most successful aspect of the conference was that it enabled me to meet lots of people in **real** life who I've known for some time in **virtual** life. I also enjoyed running a poster session, with the assistance of Peggy George, to whom I'll introduce you in a moment. A poster session is one where you have a table, computer with an internet connection and a backdrop on which to pin, erm, posters, for two hours. My session was about the development of a free e-book called Coming of Age: an introduction to the new worldwide web.

Others' opinions

So, what did other people make of the conference?

Peggy George, a retired Lecturer at Arizona State University and a former Elementary Principal of 25 years, agrees that communication was a key factor. (See her article in this newsletter too.)

"One powerful "aha" moment for me in this conference", says Peggy, "was when I observed many well-known web 2.0 technology leaders and experts participating actively in other presentations in order to learn more. They weren't just there to present and share their own expertise, but to collaborate and interact with others to expand their own knowledge and experience."

She continues:

"The best part of it all is that the learning and collaboration doesn't stop with the end of the conference but continues every day after through the access provided to so many of the handouts, presentations, websites, blogs, podcasts and wikis that continue to be available throughout the year."

That's a point taken up by Steve Hargadon:

"I think conference organizers are naturally going to be wary of Web 2.0 technologies, and worried that they will do away with the need to attend physically. I think the exact opposite is going to happen. I think that the technologies will actually increase the value of the conferences and the face-to-face engagement."

Steve is the project director for the CoSN K-12 Open Technologies Initiative, a blogger on educational technology, and the founder of the Classroom 2.0 social network.

But is there a danger of a conference becoming **too** big? Vince Jansen, an education consultant in Quebec, sounds a cautionary note:

"I think NECC is too commercial and even political, which has pushed student and teacher classroom practice to the periphery. Still, I was quite impressed by some student robotic demonstrations I saw, which clearly highlighted the ingenuity, creativity and collaborative effort of student teams even though it was hidden down the hallway of the exhibition area!"

Talking of the exhibition area, what was new and cool at this year's show that perhaps we in the UK need to be looking out for? Vince again:

"On the exhibition floor there were two distinct flavours for this year's conference, personalised education services and edu-gaming. Gaming software were mainly targeting the mathematics or science fields. There certainly was a strong multimedia presence and use of video, but I did not see many viable "new apps" that could contribute significantly in classrooms within the current year."

You can read more of Vince's thoughts on the worldwide web.

For Brian Crosby, author of the Learning is Messy blog and fourth grade teacher at Agnes Risley School in Sparks, Nevada, USA, the best thing since sliced bread is Pocketcaster. He writes:

"Pocketcaster software, which is a free download, allows your mobile phone to stream live video to their website where it is archived. Then you can put your clips together later to make a video project."

I have to say, this looks pretty good. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to try it out for myself because my own phone isn't supported at the moment. Therefore I am unable to tell you if we in the UK will be able to avail ourselves of the service. On the other hand, there is nothing to suggest we **won't** be able to.

How about those hundreds of presentations I mentioned earlier? For Brian Grenier, the "gosh!" moment was, in his words, to do with the role of librarians in schools.

"I was really surprised to hear so much talk about, and attend a number of sessions on, the need for our libraries to rethink their roles in our schools. The librarians themselves are driving this kind of thinking. I was especially impressed by a talk by Doug Johnson on the subject."

As the Technology Site Coordinator at El Paso Independent School District, Brian was also interested in attending sessions about the "new" students in our schools and what their demographics means to educators. Presumably kids in the USA are, like their counterparts on this side of the pond, incredibly tech-savvy, adept at multitasking and multi-conversing, supremely comfortable with any new device that comes out on the market and, above all, very happy to share their thoughts with people they hardly know, and have never met, through social networking sites like Facebook.

Vinnie Vrotny is the Director of Academic Technology and is at the North Shore Country Day School, in Winnetka, Illinois. For him, a presentation called "Rock our World: Global Awareness Across the Curriculum" by Anne Reardon, and one by Sharon Peters, called "Online Collaborative Learning for High School Students, A Blended Approach", were the ones that stood out. It was about being mentally stimulated: "I enjoyed the fact that the presenters challenged my thinking and notions about collaboration."

Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach, who publishes the 21st century learning blog, spoke to many teachers at the conference (and recorded their thoughts). She says:

"Tennyson the poet says we are a part of all we have ever met; if that is true I am such a better person having attended NECC. I can't wait until next year."

So, in conclusion: NECC was exhilarating, exhausting, exciting and – sorry, I can't think of any more words starting with "e". So I'll let Vince Jansen have the last word. He reminds us that, beyond all the razzmatazz, just one important fact remains. As he puts it:

"The true impact in learning success is still in the hands of a good teacher."

To find out more about the conference sessions mentioned here, go to the conference website and use the Program Search facility.

Some thoughts about NECC

Peggy George gives us a personal view of last year's conference.

Enthusiasm

This was my 3rd NECC conference and each year it is gotten better for me. The real value of NECC for me (and many others because it's always the first thing they say when asked about what they got out of the conference) is the professional networking that occurs before, during and after the conference. The books, blogs, and wikis we read as well as the podcasts we listen all year long come to life as we get to meet and listen first-hand to the incredible passion people have about using technology to improve learning for students. I have never met educators over my 35 years as an educator who are so willing and eager to share as I have met in the web 2.0 environment. They enthusiastically share their resources and thinking, and actively invite feedback and critique as they listen to divergent points of view.

How refreshing it is to have people listen to what you have to say and think along with you about change as we all struggle to prepare students for a future we can't even describe.

David Warlick talks about this as the "learning engine" and these conversations have inspired me to want to continue to learn and grow to make learning relevant for myself as well as my students and colleagues.

Aha!

One powerful "aha" moment for me in this conference confirmed this point when I observed many well-known web 2 technology leaders and experts participating actively in other presentations in order to learn more. They weren't just there to present and share their own expertise, but to collaborate and interact with others to expand their own knowledge and experience. People didn't wear their titles and latest publications/endeavours on their shirt-sleeve by constantly promoting their own work, but they were there to learn and have conversations. Beginners felt valued for their questions and experts challenged each other as we all listened in. Everyone felt comfortable and safe learning new things or thinking of things in new ways.

Two learning experiences

The two most powerful learning experiences for me in the conference were these: the opportunity to participate in Terry Freedman's Poster Session on the Coming of Age 2.0 book and the privilege of being an audience member and contributor during a live podcast session with the Women of the Web 2 group. In **both** sessions I met people who shared an excitement and passion about how they were using web 2 tools to support learning for students and teachers. They genuinely cared about answering the questions and listening to the ideas and concerns, and eagerly shared their own resources, experiences and encouragement with everyone.

They laughed and cried, they questioned, worried and explored suggestions, and they accommodated technology glitches with ease (lost Skype connections, failure of TV monitor, etc.). They kept their focus on the important messages they had to share – something I experienced in every session I attended.

The excitement I witnessed during Terry's Poster Session showed me how eager people were to learn everything they could about web 2, and Terry's comfortable, interpersonal style and sense of humour provided them with answers and encouragement through every interaction. The excitement generated through his book and the opportunity to meet many of the authors, not only during his session but through his podcast interview with 12 of them during the conference helped all of us experience their passion and current thinking about teaching and learning. Where else can you go where you can feel you are a valued part of the experience and not just a recipient of the information? It was and continues to be awe-inspiring and I am proud I was able to be part of it.

The Bloggers' Café provided everyone with a powerful opportunity to interact with others and to watch them use web 2 tools and develop ideas on the spot. They excitedly shared what they had heard and where they were going next and it made everyone around them eager to get to the next collaborative experience. I learned more about the latest tools and experiences people were exploring by being a "fly on the wall" in those informal conversations in the Blogger's Café than I did in any formal session, and it inspired me to want to get back home and start exploring them on my own.

And afterwards?

The best part of it all is that the learning and collaboration doesn't stop with the end of the conference but continues every day after through the access provided to so many of the handouts, presentations, websites, blogs, podcasts and wikis that continue to be available throughout the year. Reading participant blogs as bloggers process their conference experiences extends the thinking and learning even more. There is no other conference I have ever attended that has motivated and inspired me to keep learning and to actively use what I have learned after the conference than NECC. In my mind, that is the ultimate professional development experience and one I will continually strive to emulate in my own life.

Peggy George is a retired Lecturer at Arizona State University and a former Elementary Principal of 25 years

Next issue

Amongst other things we look at a new book on assessment for learning in Information and Communication Technology and the all-purpose lecture. To contribute, please get in touch: terry@ictineducation.org, with the subject header "Contribute" (or just click on the link).

Feedback

What do you think of this format for the newsletter? Please let me know: terry@ictineducation.org.

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