The triumvirate of training, support and leadership are key to the provision of 1.1 technology in schools

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No silver bullet but plenty of ammunition: digital devices for schools

At a recent roundtable event in London a number leading education thinkers pondered the now decades old question – how can we provide one to one digital device access for all pupils in our schools? They concluded that without training, support and leadership the holy grail of one-to-one will still elude many pupils and thus perpetuate the digital divide.

Compared with the business world, education has been slow to adopt technology. However, while there is no silver bullet for embedding technology for the purpose of learning and teaching in schools, there is plenty of ammunition from which to construct a series of arguments and practices to change school culture for that purpose. And, despite persistent media sniping about the effectiveness of investment in technology for schools, the landscape is already changing. Schools are adopting technology, and learning and teaching is changing. The problem is that it is very patchy, with many schools moving ahead while others are struggling or even falling behind.

This was the picture that emerged at a special education discussion about 1:1 computing held in London and organised by classoos UK, an innovative, UK-based company that has created a new and compelling digital platform for textbooks for schools. The debate, involving experienced educators working with technology for learning and teaching, was considering “1:1 computing - what needs to happen before schools use the powerful devices that almost all children already have access to?”

Tim Clark director of classoos UK chaired the panel session. His assessment of digital device adoption is that, “virtually everyone in business uses a smartphone, tablet and computer and is clear about why, how and where to use them. Most secondary school students have their own mobile phones, usually turned off at school, and their own tablets or computers at home. Should they be able to use technology with the same ease as the rest of us for their learning? “Would that be a good thing?” he asked, “and if so what has to occur to make that happen? What has to change?”’

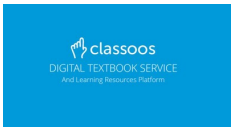
Matt Britland, director of digital strategy at Lady Eleanor Holles School, London, who is supporting the introduction of classoos in his school explained, “I recently rolled out a 1:1 iPads scheme to 686 students and about 120 members of staff in the senior school. We also have a 1:1 iPads scheme with Years 5 and 6.” The key to successful implementation was staff training and making sure staff and students have access to all the resources they need. One surprise was that some of the most cynical users were students who complained that they could not use technology for learning (they thought of them more as devices for playing games or something to use for social media).

Richard Bailey schools technology manager for the Girls' Day School Trust (GDST) was also on the panel to explain the importance of developing technology use across the group as a community of schools: “We want to build knowledge and link it to strategy so that the technology is supporting the teaching not driving it.”

Tony Parkin a former teacher, and for many years head of technology development for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust lamented the move from a college of school leadership to a teacher regulation agency and the gradual loss of a national strategic view for ICT. “The danger of one-to-one is that it became a mantra,” he observed. “Rather than people looking strategically at the benefits - and lack of benefits - from one-to-one, the trouble is that one-to-one done badly can be isolating for each individual. What I always try to do is to get people working in pairs with technology because often the most important thing that happens is interaction between the people sharing the device. So for me there is a place for one-to-one and I would say that sharing textbooks is a nightmare so, if using a device as an alternative to a printed textbook, 1:1 is probably the only way to go.”

University of Roehampton computing lecturer Miles Berry (“training the next generation of outstanding teachers “) pointed out that institutions were developing new expectations of students. “I think that in areas where there is a degree of independent autonomous learning taking place, one-to-one is pretty close to default provision,” he commented. “In fact one-to-one wasn’t a sufficiently high ratio for my students this morning; most of them had two screens with them and some had three. By the time they get to university they are expected to bring a laptop with them. It’s not a course requirement but trying to do

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the course with just the institution providing technology would be incredibly frustrating.”

“They have their phones and the phone is where they connect and contact. it’s also the medium on which they take notes so we don’t feel we have to control what they do with this technology. Similarly young children are using iPads.”

While not every child has an iPad, “increasingly there are those who do”. And parents who can afford to do so now buy mobile phones for their children “as a means to keeping them safe”.

One striking element to emerge from the discussion was that when you take the sheer newness of devices away from the technology debate clear themes emerge that have little to do with tech and everything to do with people and support. After all, thousands of years ago writing on tablets of stone was considered as modern as we think of our own digital tablets.

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