

# The Impact of ICT in Education: help or hindrance, friend or foe?

*Simon Budgen shakes his head sadly at the recent assertion that ICT is now defunct as a subject.*

## Abstract

Not only has Information and Communications Technology (ICT) become integral to the subjects we teach across the school as a cross curricular theme we have become increasingly tied to the PC through the administration and pressure placed upon us now associated with teaching. This paper will not only look at how ICT has helped our pupils and us to an extent but also how we should be prepared for the challenges ahead.

## Background

The widespread availability of the personal computer over the last two decades has dramatically changed the way our students have been educated. The growing prominence of ICT as a subject is as a direct result of these technological advancements and interdependencies within our society. Not only have we seen the increase of ICT taught as a cross-curricular theme and mapped out in schemes of work, but we have also seen the increased popularity of ICT as a free standing subject in its own right. This is evidenced by the amount of pupils taking examination courses in ICT and the growth that has occurred over the past few years in the area.

In addition to using ICT in the classroom, as practitioners we are encouraged (if not coerced) into using computers to record

exam marks, write reports, type letters and dozens of other routine tasks that we may see as mundane but nevertheless mandatory work for the modern teacher.

## Discussion

Perhaps a good place to start would be to consider the appealing nature of the use of ICT in teaching and as an aid to administration tasks. Indeed using the computer and other related technology, once we have become familiarised with it, seems to make our life easier when carrying out the aforementioned routine tasks and, of course, using the electronic whiteboard to demonstrate a complex and otherwise dull topic is also another excellent reason for our embracing and utilisation of this technology.

Why then, would I consider that ICT is, as the title suggests, a hindrance or foe?

As the status of ICT rises above other subjects for the 'Number 1' slot increasing focus is placed upon the National Curriculum and its implementation into school strategies. The programmes of study set down skills that should be developed and encouraged across the curriculum and are rigid in their content. With growing government interest it is perhaps foreseeable that their encroachment upon our promotion and development of ICT is inevitable.



The government see Teachers' use of ICT as the way to shape the future. It is with this in mind that they have ploughed millions of pounds into the ICT training of teachers. The DfES have claimed that such training is a 'major priority' and set the mandatory objective for teachers to improve their competency in ICT through training courses. Indeed we have seen that with NOF and ECDL there has been a major increase in schools' training provision.

Figures released from the DfES themselves show that in 1998 61% of teachers felt confident in using ICT and this has now grown to 80% in 2002, so their objective seems to be working and thus teaching of ICT as a cross curricular theme can easily be enforced now that teachers are proficient users of such technology. Indeed, as more of us are encompassing this technology it is likely that we are able to use it to improve our professional lives.

As another set of reports loom I sometimes wonder whether 'cutting' and 'pasting' and proof reading over and over again could be made easier by reverting to the old-fashioned hand written reports. "Well why don't you write them!" I hear you cry - easier said than done! As an ICT Teacher I feel obliged and somewhat of a hypocrite if they are not typed, and maybe also frowned upon by parents and teachers for not encompassing the technology that I am trained to teach.

Perhaps now is a good time to make clear exactly what I am arguing. No doubt I have confused you with my arguments that ICT has had a positive effect yet I consider it an obstacle in my profession. Let me make clear, that as a self-confessed technophile, I have a love for my subject and consider it to be an extremely important aspect of pupils' study. However, what I do consider infuriating is the constant pressure that teachers are placed under to embrace ICT in

their teaching and in their other professional duties. In other words using ICT for the sake of using it. If science teachers can use ICT to record live experimental data and Maths teachers can use Logo/Turtle to help contextualise a difficult topic then that is encouraging. As much education discourse shows that pupils react well to practical experiences of ICT and is, according to the government, contributing to higher academic performance, improved motivation, more exciting teaching and learning, and to reducing truancy it is only a good thing. But for those schools that are under funded in ICT (as are Welsh schools) and for those teachers that find ICT a daunting area why should we make it compulsory for them to include it in their practice?

It is clear, even when looking within one school, that the implementation of ICT across the curriculum is not simple. The core subjects struggle to integrate the use of ICT which is largely down to logistics and under funding. I speak from experience that having to set up a laptop, projector and electronic whiteboard through lunchtime to deliver a half hour presentation does not actively motivate you to do it again. Indeed when talking with a colleague from the LEA he highlighted the difference of funding that schools face. Even between LEAs funding is different, but it is even more apparent between countries. The funding in England is reported to be an average of £45,000 per ICT department whereas in Wales it has not been made clear whether £45,000 is available for one LEA. It is clear that with this huge disparity of funding schools are at different stages in their use of ICT.

Isn't it somewhat hypocritical that with an under funding of resources the powers that be place increasing importance upon using ICT. Yet with initiative after initiative it



places teachers under significant pressure to embrace the technology that the government delivers their training in.

I still try to keep an open mind about ICT having a benefit two fold for schools; firstly, as with any business, it can be a powerful tool for managing and administration with a hope of reducing workload and secondly, imposing another dimensional medium to help to teach our subjects. I always at this point of thought take heed of my University Tutor's favourite phrase when I was training to teach; "variety is the very spice of life". This brings me back to a previous point about the cross-curricularity of ICT. Using ICT in other lessons is, as I have said, most encouraging for that subject and adds 'variety' to the lesson. However, it should not be considered a 'must' and subjects should not lose sight of their overall objective of teaching their subject content. I think it is our job as ICT teachers to teach ICT. It is with deep regret I read in the Times Education Supplement that teachers consider ICT as a defunct subject that can be taught through other subjects.

With this in mind we must consider whether we are making a rod for our own back? A greater number of teachers will be proficient users of ICT, ICT will be used more widely for administration, ICT will be taught only through other subjects in the curriculum. Perhaps this is why it is a hindrance or foe?

## Conclusion

It is clear having read around this subject that the impact that ICT has had on education has been most favourable and it is clear that, when used correctly, ICT applies variation and motivation for pupils. However, it is also apparent that computer use, on the whole, is conducted in a very shallow and uninventive manner, with basic

application software being used giving no real benefit to the lesson. In how many different subjects do we see teachers instructing their pupils to create a depressingly naïve newspaper using a word processor? This is not largely down to the fact that teachers are uninventive, simply that teachers are placed under immense pressure to include ICT in their schemes of work. Indeed with the increased coverage of ICT within subject areas it has been murmured that ICT should not exist as a subject in its own right. As professional ICT users perhaps we should take it upon ourselves to ensure that the technology that has revolutionised industry and the home revolutionises education in equal proportions – or will the most important addition to education for decades become forgotten in an idealistic dream?

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