

Chapter 3

Getting Teachers to Use New Technology by Just Giving Them Time: A Case Study from the UK

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The chapter reports on a UK project which was designed to explore innovative ways of getting teachers to develop their use of new technology in subject teaching. The outcomes of this project suggest that in the area of developing teachers' use of ICT in subject teaching, simply providing support for teachers, in the form of time to explore the potential of ICT, to meet together to discuss ICT in subject groupings, and freedom to focus on their preferred ICT agendas, may be a more effective way forward than pre-scribing lists of required competences and providing generic 'training' type courses. This goes against the grain in an era characterised by 'top-down', centrally directed national strategies, high levels of accountability and auditing of teachers, and 'coverage' models of competence (Ball, 2003), but given the disappointingly sluggish and modest outcomes of such programmes, in the UK and elsewhere, such approaches may be worth exploring more extensively.

'Excessive directive methods of government that appear to treat front-line deliverers as unable to think for themselves, untrustworthy or incompetent, undermine the very motivation and adaptability on which real world success depends.... Driving through policies with an implicit assumption that the main players are the problem rather than the solution is usually a recipe for failure' (Performance and Innovation Unit, UK, 2001).

'The floggings will continue until morale improves' (Czar Alexander III of Russia, attrib.).

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter details the processes and outcomes of a small funded project in the UK which was designed to explore the potential of less directive and ‘top-down’ strategies for developing teachers’ use of ICT and e-learning in their subject teaching. The basic premise was to give teachers dedicated time, and the opportunity to collaborate and discuss ICT and e-learning issues, in a way which allowed them complete freedom to choose what aspects of ICT and e-learning they wanted to explore and develop.

CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

The UK is one of many countries in the developed world where politicians have invested considerable belief, pressure and funding in the potential of new technology to enhance educational outcomes. Politicians from all parties in the United Kingdom have been unequivocally positive about the part that new technology will play in enhancing educational outcomes, with Conservative Minister David Hunt stating that ‘the nation which embraces technology most willingly and most effectively will be the winners in tomorrow’s world’ (Hunt, 1995), Labour Education Minister Charles Clarke (1999) elevating new technology above even literacy and numeracy in asserting that ‘Familiarity with ICT is the most vital life skill for the generation now going through school’, and former Prime Minister Tony Blair making a number of eulogistic speeches about educational transformation through technology use (see, for example, Blair, 1995, 1997).

This belief in the power of ICT to transform educational outcomes has resulted in considerable pressure on teachers in the United Kingdom to use information and communications technology (ICT) in their classrooms. The Education Ministry in the UK instigated biennial surveys to monitor teachers’ use of ICT; school inspection reports

criticised schools and teachers who were not using computers (Harrison, 2003), the teaching force was described by the ministry as ‘a hurdle which needs to be overcome’ in relation to developing the use of computers (quoted in Cohen, 1999) and a leading figure in the promotion of ICT in education asserted that ‘in future, there will be two types of teacher, the IT literate and the retired’ (Cochrane 1995).

In spite of these pressures, and in spite of substantial investment in ICT in schools, uptake in teachers’ use of new technology has remained disappointingly sluggish in the UK (Nichol & Watson, 2003; Reynolds, Treharne, & Tripp, 2003; Selwyn, 2003). The ImpaCT 2 Report suggested that perhaps as many as 60% of teachers in the UK were making little or no use of computers in their day-to-day teaching (Harrison *et al.*, 2002). Research reports from outside the UK suggest that this problem is not limited to the UK, and that in spite of substantial financial investment in ICT in education worldwide, many teachers struggle to successfully integrate new technology into their teaching (Phillips, 2002; Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon & Byers, 2002; Zhao & Frank, 2003).

Learning from Mistakes Which Have Been Made

Although the UK government’s commitment to the development of a technologically empowered and accomplished educational workforce has been steadfast and wholehearted, it has at times been misguided and ill-informed in its interventions and investments. Part of our research over the past decade has been in evaluating the impact of a range of government funded initiatives in education, and exploring the reasons why teachers and pre-service teachers do or do not use ICT in their teaching. There is some evidence to suggest that within the UK, many of the interventions, policies and investment in getting teachers to embed the use of ICT in classroom teaching have not been found to be helpful by teachers, or have even been counter-productive, and have had

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