



There was a slightly frenzied feel to the Westminster Education Forum on “The future of technology in education”. About 150 policy makers met with interested parties in the education sector to try and bring clarity to the confusion surrounding the procurement and effective use of digital technologies in schools and colleges since the demise of government ICT agency BECTA, the abandonment of the Harnessing Technology Strategy and £100 million raid on schools’ own grants for ICT.

The somewhat intense nature of the event was due to the many speakers and panellists who were invited to stimulate the delegates and discussion in five-minute ‘provocations’. There was a lot of ground to cover in a relatively short time.

The strategic issues of the importance of technology in schools was tackled in the first part of the morning before moving on to the role of digital technology in assessment after coffee, and finally “Skills and challenges for the future”. It was an ambitious aim for the forum but with skillful chairing by Lord Jim Knight, the former schools minister and political powerhouse behind many advances in the use of technology for learning in schools (now also a consultant for Apple Inc and TSL Education), and the discipline of the presenters, the forum covered a tremendous amount of ground.

One of the strengths of Westminster Education Forum events is the “punchy” style followed by detailed transcripts, which provide an opportunity for a more detailed and reflective examination of the issues.

Interestingly this event came fast on the heels of a joint Policy Exchange/Naace “think tank” which suggests that education ministers are beginning to acknowledge they may have got it wrong on the issue of ICT in schools (see “Policy Exchange agrees Government ‘mistaken’ on ICT”

<http://www.agent4change.net/ict-policy/government-strategy/1179>). And several mentions of a forthcoming “embryonic” Department for Education (DfE) technology strategy which will focus on the use of technology to improve the quality of teaching, savings to be made through aggregated procurement and proposals that schools should become more “intelligent consumers”.

Whether this will fully exploit the potential that digital technologies present for learning and improved levels of achievement and attainment remains to be seen. We were told that it will have to be one of the issues subjected to a “more detailed and reflective examination of the issues” by all involved, including education ministers and DfE officials. (You have to wonder whether the assessors will include the DfE’s own ‘tweeter’, challenged by humble calculators, who posted the following comment on Twitter: “[educationgovuk](#) Interesting article in the Washington Post on technology in the classroom [wapo.st/qMyC1t](#) To some of us the calculators look v hi-tech”.)

One thing which emerged from this stimulating and relevant event is the desperate need for headteachers, governors, teachers and local authorities (“schools know best” according to schools minister Nick Gibb) to get the support and advice they need to help schools ensure our children are prepared for the digital world of the third millennium.

It was no coincidence that the strongest contributions to the forum came from educators steeped in pedagogy and learning. Open University senior lecturer Dr Peter Twining, who is director of one of the government’s best kept secrets for supporting teaching, the Vital support and development service, queried the increasingly common assertion that teaching is simply a “craft” and that the professionalism of teachers and their understanding of pedagogy are extremely important.

“And I suspect we’ve moved to an era of where the last Government and maybe the Government before started to turn teaching into a craft, a trade; you know, we talk about



teacher training these days, not teacher education,” he added. “We’ve removed an awful lot of the underpinning theory about learning and about philosophy, education, from initial teacher education and we’ve replaced it with how do you teach synthetic phonics and how to deliver a literacy strategy and we’re left with people who’ve come out beautifully trained to deliver certain styles of pedagogy but who actually don’t have the underpinning knowledge to be able to adapt when things change.

“I think there’s a real danger for us in moving to a model of talking about teaching as being a craft and we really need to be very careful about maintaining professionalism.”

His words were music to the ears of one of the best school leaders of the emerging generation of school leaders, Dr Neil Hopkin, executive headteacher of Rosendale Primary School, West Dulwich, and Christ Church CE Primary School, Brixton. He welcomed the stress on pedagogy and gave a grave warning on the negative effect on ICT for learning posed by the new curriculum. “I think that there’s a real danger here of what’s happening with the new curriculum which will be with us soon... to a certain extent, as you’ve just mentioned, ICT [and] new technology have disappeared off the radar and let’s be absolutely pragmatic about this from a school leaders’ perspective.

“If you’re publishing league tables and measuring various different A* to C’s or key stage 2 results or whatever it might be, these teachers are human and they’re not fools. They will ensure that their schools do well according to league tables, that’s simply what will happen and to believe otherwise or to be altruistic is to be too naive. So the reality is, if new technology and ICT has disappeared or is disappearing off the curricula radar, all articulated very nicely about it being very embedded, you go to loads of schools up and down the country and see how embedded it is – absolutely not at all.

“If it’s not measured, if it’s not going to be an explicit part of the curriculum in the same way, let me tell you folks, it won’t happen and what will happen is over the course of, I would predict say three or four years, you will find that the investment of intellectual time and CPD time, the monitoring time, the leadership teams of schools put into these kind of subjects to ensure that other subjects are being delivered through new technologies won’t happen.

“And we will find ourselves in three to four years, I’m very worried, we will find ourselves at a country that has fallen a long way off the boil in terms of new technologies. The people in this room are those that need to lobby and agitate for that not to happen, it will be a disaster for us, I can see it coming, I can see it coming.”

Such a warning, from such an educator, underlines the increasing and urgent need for strategic leadership of ICT as support mechanisms previously enjoyed melt away.

LINKS:

EXite (Exploiting Information Technology in Education)

<http://www.exite.org.uk>

Vital

<http://www.vital.ac.uk>

Westminster Education Forum

http://www.westminsterforumprojects.co.uk/forums/index.php?fid=westminster_education_forum