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Open Windows:

Becoming an e-learning school

What does an e-learning school look like? How does a school become an e-learning school? How is e-learning different from traditional teaching and learning?

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Introduction

The National Grid For Learning (NGFL) publication *Transforming the Way We Learn – a Vision for the Future of ICT in Schools* uses the term 'e-learning' to describe how ICT (information and communications technology) can change the way teachers teach, students learn and schools are led and managed. The report says that e-learning is:

'a range of activities, from the effective use of digital resources and learning technologies in the classroom, through to a personal learning experience enabled through individual access at home or elsewhere. Combined with established e-learning experiences, it can provide individuals with new and exciting opportunities to realise their academic and creative potential at their own pace. It also lays the foundations for effective life-long learning'. (NGFL, 2002 p6. www.dfes.gov.uk/ictfutures)

I wanted to find answers to two questions: What do e-learning schools look like? How did they become e-learning schools?

I visited one primary and six secondary schools. My data consisted of notes, audio recordings and video recordings of what was said in interviews with headteachers and other staff and of the action I saw in the schools I visited. I had a strong interest in seeing what e-learning looked like in practical terms.

Students in an e-learning school

The evidence from the seven schools suggests that students in an e-learning school will:

- be skilled at using information technology. They have an understanding of the software applications – usually Microsoft Word, Excel, Access and PowerPoint and can decide when to use the computer as a tool in their pieces of work.

- either have their own laptop or be able to use a free computer in an independent learning centre or in one of the clusters of computers set up around the school. They can access their saved work through a wireless or hardwired network from anywhere in the school.

- be familiar with using software in music and art, and may have access to digital cameras and editing equipment.

- expect to be in some lessons where the teacher uses a laptop and interactive whiteboard.

- be familiar with using the internet through a broadband connection, allowing multiple uses by members of the school. They will use e-mail for some of their communications.

Students will have more control of their own learning, and will be developing the skills of independent learning. Teachers will have changed their teaching style to accommodate new ways of learning.

Becoming an e-learning establishment

I asked headteachers how their schools had developed their e-learning capacity.

Our discussions indicated that the following factors are significant in the development of an e-learning school:

■ Leadership

- ☐ All the schools have a clear strategy concerned with planning for the development of ICT, and some of them pointed to their school development plan as the means for expressing this.

- ☐ The main thrust of these e-learning schools is to use ICT to develop teaching and learning.

- ☐ The leadership of e-learning is headed up in different ways according to the culture and staffing structure of the school.

- ☐ A combination of hierarchy and distributed leadership can be an effective way of moving the school forward.

- ☐ The role of non-teaching staff is significant.

Management

☐ Allocation of significant resources is required.

☐ All the schools declared their web site to be a key to the development of teaching and learning.

☐ Schools report that once teachers are able to take laptops home and explore their potential, the teachers' confidence in the use of new technology increases, and their use of ICT in the classroom increases.

☐ Most schools have a system of monitoring how extensively and effectively departments are using ICT facilities.

Teacher support

☐ The schools are strong at networking and sharing ideas.

☐ A major area of support for teachers is the provision of hardware (often a laptop) to develop their ideas and confidence.

☐ Formal teacher training in the use of ICT is rated as essential.

☐ All the schools are working on the development of teaching. The teachers are moving from the role of pedagogue to that of facilitator, or as one headteacher put it, from 'the sage on the stage to the guide on the side'.

Teaching and learning

☐ All the schools are concerned to develop teaching and learning and see e-learning as a significant way of doing this.

☐ Headteachers talked about teaching and learning before they explained where they were in terms of e-learning. The philosophy of the school in relation to teaching and learning is more important than the description of infrastructure or technology or how many computers they possess. The changes to teaching are intricately bound into the developments of the technology and to separate them is difficult.

☐ These schools at the forefront of e-learning try out new ways of teaching and are open in discussions in order to decide on the ways forward.

E-learning versus traditional teaching and learning

The evidence from the study suggests that for e-learning to take place, teaching has to change, schools have to be equipped with the technology to open out learning and students need to approach learning in a different way. The following features can be observed in e-learning schools.

Students:

☐ see lesson content presented in exciting ways, using new technologies which stimulate learning – laptop computers, interactive whiteboards, digital media, software and the internet.

☐ are guided to find things out for themselves or to solve problems using the technology. There is a shift to active searching for knowledge.

☐ accept that their peers, and adults other than teachers, give effective help to enable them to move forward. Learning isn't mediated only through the teacher.

☐ can be in control of their leaning – they can plan a day's work around the targets set through software programmes such as Microsoft's Class Server.

☐ do not need to rely solely on the teacher for feedback on their work – computer systems are being developed which either mark work for them or enable them to self-mark. Immediate feedback is therefore possible and this is very motivating.

☐ can work at their own pace and follow areas of their own interest.

☐ can access sources of information independently and do not need the teacher's instructions in order to do this.

☐ can present their learning in varied formats. It can be colourful, neat, spell-checked, exciting and with audio or visual accompaniments.

■ Teachers:

☐ relinquish ideas of controlling students' learning – they enable students to set their own learning agendas within specified parameters.

☐ can save and share good lessons through the intranet, thereby reducing workloads and increasing versatility.

☐ can download lesson plans and materials.

☐ can access a large range of materials from a single source – their computer.

☐ can track, record and report on students' progress more easily using the technology and software available.

☐ can put in place assessment systems which record and report on students' progress every few weeks (eg six or eight weeks). These reports form the basis of discussion and target setting with students. The form tutor takes on an important role here.

☐ can take advantage of the managed learning environment which, when fully developed in their schools, could reduce work load significantly.

☐ have more time to spend working with students and are less bogged down with administration, marking, and preparation of lessons.

Conclusion

It is clear that some schools have understood and are meeting the challenge of developing themselves as e-learning institutions, but there are large numbers of schools who have yet to open the windows to e-learning.

It is salutary perhaps to reflect on the concluding paragraph of the summary of the recent NFER/TC Trust study *High Performing Specialist Schools – What Makes The Difference?*

It must be stressed once more, however … that there are no easy solutions, no 'quick fixes' and no instant recipes for success even for schools of this quality. One of the main ingredients of success in any school is the continued hard work of staff and students, and the interconnectedness of all …activities. Without these key ingredients … other factors are unlikely to make any significant impact. (NFER 2002)

I hope that hearing how these schools have moved towards e-learning will encourage and inspire others to follow. E-learning has the potential to transform schools, teaching and learning. It is more than 'just another initiative'. It is the future school, with the potential to produce, as one headteacher said, 'world-class student outcomes'.

References

NGF (2002) **Transforming the Way We Learn – a Vision for the Future of ICT in Schools,** DFES, London, www.dfes.gov.uk/ictfutures

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Acknowledgements:

Research Associate Reports Available in Autumn 02

Two Heads Better than One? Building a cross-phase school of the future, Alison Banks, Catherine Finn, Smita Bora, Karen Lee and Carol Watson, Chafford Hundred Campus, Thurrock

Working Smarter Together: The development of an enquiry team across 12 schools, Trish Franey, Networked Learning Communities

Open Windows: Becoming an e-learning school, Moyra Evans, formerly Denbigh School, Milton Keynes

Leading from the Classroom: The impact of the assistant headteacher in primary schools, Peter RJ Smith, Swallowdale Primary School, Melton Mowbray

Passion and Intuition: The impact of life history on leadership, Richard Parker, Lodge Park Technology College, Corby

The First 100 Days: An enquiry into the first 100 days of headship in a failing school, Patricia Brown, School Development Adviser, Hertfordshire

Team Talk: Sharing leadership in primary schools, Alison Kelly, Hooe Primary School, Plymouth

The Intelligent Gaze: Leadership, lead learners and individual growth – a reflective enquiry, Steve Kenning, Callington Community School, Cornwall

Summary and full reports of these and previous research associate studies are available from the NCSL web site at **www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates**

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The research summarised here is part of the NCSL Research Associateship Programme, which offers an opportunity for school leaders to contribute towards the College's research and development agenda. NCSL provides support for school leaders to undertake study, to engage in enquiry and to impact on practice. The programme includes:

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