2004 Report: ICT in schools – the impact of government initiatives

Secondary religious education

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Introduction

This report is based on subject-specific evidence from visits to secondary schools made as part of the inspection of the impact of government ICT initiatives between April 2002 and December 2003 and supplemented by evidence from other school visits where appropriate. This contributed to the main report, *ICT in schools*, which is available from the Ofsted publications centre (07002 637833) or via the Ofsted website (www.ofsted.gov.uk).

Main findings

- Most religious education (RE) teachers now have reasonable access to computers for personal use and show increasing confidence in the use of ICT for administration, lesson preparation and day-to-day planning.
- Many teachers have improved their own ICT skills and personal enthusiasm has opened up some new and effective learning opportunities for students. Many teachers, in improving their own skills and developing particular enthusiasms, have found ICT applications which enhance their teaching.
- Even so, many others have limited vision of the range of ICT applications available for the subject. Some ICT tasks are not effectively matched to pupils' learning capacities. Too often they do not provide appropriate challenge or further pupils' capacity to understand, apply and make connections between information gained.
- Pupils' skills are generally sufficient to enable them to use ICT to serve RE objectives without distraction.
- When pupils used ICT well, there was a clear improvement in the presentation of their work, in the range of information they had to draw on, in their capacity to enter imaginatively into others' situations and in their understanding and analysis of key concepts.
- Despite improvements in teachers' skills, in most schools ICT is not yet integral to the learning process in RE. The facility for pupils to use computers is often determined by the availability of ICT suites rather than by the demands of the curriculum.
- Responses to training opportunities have been variable. The most productive staff development has been that provided by professional collaboration within schools rather than through distance learning or online support. The most important catalyst for moving staff forward has been sustained access to appropriate hardware.
- Training opportunities provided by various agencies and professional associations often have not been taken up by teachers.

- It is rare to see, in subject documentation, any clear formulation of the principles of good practice in using ICT to raise standards of teaching and learning, or clear criteria for effective monitoring.

The impact of the initiatives

Teaching and learning in religious education

In all schools visited, most teachers were using ICT as a matter of course as a tool for administration, lesson preparation, day-to-day planning, devising worksheets, and departmental documentation. Usually these tasks were achieved to a good professional standard. Many used the internet for their own research and found that ICT had greatly improved their access to learning resources and expanded their horizons with respect to the learning opportunities available to students. For some, ICT had provided a new drive in their teaching, although most RE departments were still not making the most of the potential of ICT for teaching and learning in the subject.

No department visited had made ICT integral to the learning process as an entitlement for all pupils. The use of ICT was a matter of individual initiative and it was common to see individual staff being resourceful and bringing their own skills and enthusiasms to bear on classroom practice as opportunities arose. Often there was inconsistency of practice among teachers in a department, depending on personal skills and access to resources. In most cases, schools provided one or two opportunities a term for a class to use ICT in RE lessons, and were not in a position to provide any sustained applications of ICT across a whole unit of study.

The promotion of pupils' learning was variable, depending on the teachers' expertise both in the subject and ICT, and on their expectations of pupils. Where it was good, staff used ICT to present clear teaching points: for example they used multimedia presentations to stimulate interest through challenging graphic images; to enable students to complete purposeful tasks quickly and effectively; to extend learning resources available to students; and to prepare clear and well-designed worksheets. For instance:

> *A Year 7 class had prepared, with the help of the ICT co-ordinator, a presentation on Advent with animation and a music soundtrack. At various points pupils were expected to reflect on their learning by recording and talking about their own preparations for Christmas and writing an appropriate message to a friend. Facilities fell short, however, of allowing them to have direct access to the presentation on their own computers, to consolidate their learning, or to engage with it electronically, for example through web-links or writing frames.*

One teacher who, prior to his New Opportunites Fund (NOF) training, had no computer knowledge, led a very effective lesson in a computer suite, using ICT to develop pupils' understanding of key concepts and terms:

A Year 11 class was starting a new topic on equal rights, prejudice and discrimination. The teacher had prepared a range of key words, printed on cards, one of which was attached to each of the work stations such as: disability, sexism, racism, ageism, superior, inferior, integrated, ignorance, tolerance, minority. As students entered, the projector was displaying, randomly, relevant images and symbols. The stages of the lesson were presented imaginatively through a multimedia presentation, and lesson aims displayed. The teacher explored the meaning and definition of the term 'equality', and there followed a lively and good-humoured exchange of views on 'sameness', making connections, on screen, with 'equality' statements from the Bible and Hadith. Students were given a computer-generated worksheet, on which they worked individually to record an example of inequality, and then in pairs, adding further examples. All remained focused and applied themselves confidently to the task. The teacher moved them on quickly, managing available time effectively.

A definition of prejudice and discrimination was offered in the presentation, and questions were put to individual students to develop their understanding. Students were then asked to complete an exercise, using a page installed on their computers, assigning various statements to the appropriate category. One pair of students was not allowed to use the computer, apparently because of an evidently pretended 'prejudice' from the teacher (based on dress preferences); this added a touch of realism to the discussions. Students' work was saved to their own work area and printed out for use in class discussion. There was a high level of interaction and engagement, and the written task gave them confidence to participate. Activities were thought-provoking and relevant. Key points of the lesson were summarised at the end, using the presentational software. The lesson displayed very good time management, and strategic, well-timed, applications of the computer. ICT was of considerable benefit in gaining and maintaining interest, in making learning resources accessible, and enabling pupils to process their own work quickly and efficiently. Tasks engaged all, regardless of ability, and were sufficiently open to allow them to respond at their own level.

ICT had a positive impact on motivation. Pupils were often found working on an exercise of retrieval and organisation of information with a degree of concentration and application that would be rare without the use of computers.

Students on a general sixth form course worked hard on a multimedia presentation for Year 7 pupils explaining Christmas customs.

In a Year 10 lesson, students were well motivated in using the CD-ROM on Interactive Moral Issues. In their own words they recorded such information as the stages of development of a foetus, when abortion was legal, relevant Bible quotations, and drafted their own letters, suggesting a religious response as well as their own.

Relevant uses of ICT included representing selected internet narratives in different formats (for example articles for the magazine Big Issue and posters on human rights), guided internet research, surveys using spreadsheets, keeping diaries, developing email contacts with faith communities, creating departmental data-bases of teaching resources, cached internet pages, text extracts and images of local places of worship. In

one school, effective use was made of ‘mind-mapping’ software, used, for instance, to develop skills of analysis and categorisation when exploring the subject of miracles.

In most instances, teachers were able to rely on pupils’ existing ICT skills and did not have to spend an inordinate amount of time explaining how to use the technology. This meant that the subject-specific aims could be paramount as the lesson proceeded. Good teachers were able, for instance, to provide carefully selected websites or CD-ROMs for pupils’ research and to ensure, through the kind of activities planned, that the technology served the purposes of the subject, providing challenge and furthering pupils’ capacity to understand, apply and make connections between information gained.

ICT was not used so successfully where inappropriate teaching methods were recycled, necessitating low-level responses from students (for example, cloze procedure exercises, or tasks which were too easy or dull, such as copying information on the screen to handwritten sheets and answering closed, factual questions). Some of the applications seen were insufficiently challenging to have a significant impact on pupils’ conceptual understanding or to allow the application of their learning to their previous knowledge or experience. In some lessons, teachers used tasks which occupied pupils happily, but which did not stretch them in terms of their capability and the demands of the subject. For example, Year 10 pupils in one lesson copied out by hand ‘interesting facts’ about the celebration of Christmas around the world, without any attempt to analyse or reflect on information gained or to relate this to earlier learning.

Occasionally teachers were quick to use an ICT resource, for example a website on Hindu gods, without considering the most effective ways to use and develop it. This resulted in time wasted on browsing and arranging material on a page. Pupils often selected the first reference they could find to the topic in question, and did not engage with the subject matter critically or reflectively enough before printing out undigested passages of text. This was often because of demands of time, lack of awareness of the wider structure and content of a website, or because the task was not sufficiently well structured to enable them to make connections between aspects of their learning.

In some cases teachers did not have, or did not exercise, sufficient control over individual pupils’ work as they sat at a computer, allowing them to be distracted by irrelevant material or to spend too much time on the less demanding aspects of their assignment like formatting the title or considering the layout. Often there was little or no teacher intervention with the class as a whole, to offer review and direction as the lesson proceeded. Very little effective use was made of ICT to provide formative assessment and to allow pupils to draft their work before completing it.

Standards and achievement in religious education

ICT made a relatively modest contribution to pupils’ overall achievement in RE mainly because, in most situations, computer-based work was not sustained beyond a single lesson. The impact on standards was more significant where pupils had regular access to relevant hardware. When pupils used ICT well, there was a clear improvement in the presentation of their work, in the range of information they had to draw on, in their capacity to enter imaginatively into others’ situations (such as through virtual tours or

reading accounts of people's personal dilemmas), and in their understanding and analysis of key concepts. The following example is from a Year 10 lesson:

> *Pupils gleaned information for promotional leaflets for and against abortion, using the website of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, text books and other sources, organising information in such a way as to think about their own response to the issue and to promote their chosen cause.*

ICT had greatly enriched the information base available to pupils, and some were able to produce, at a relatively early age, well-informed booklets, for instance, on the Hajj or festivals, as well as, in later years, high-quality course work for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

In many cases, achievement was not sufficiently advanced because teachers lacked overall awareness and vision of the range of ICT applications available for the subject or because the applications they chose were not well matched to pupils' capabilities. At times, pupils were busily engaged, but they worked at a conceptual level well below their capability, sometimes recycling information by answering closed questions, with little or no challenge to evaluate or apply their learning.

> *Year 7 pupils were exploring the significance of Hindu gods, but wasted a lot of time browsing the internet. Their work was mainly an exercise in copying and pasting images and labels which could have been made available on a school intranet site in order to engage pupils in a more challenging task.*

In none of the schools visited were pupils able to display their work on a school website.

Implementation in schools

Leadership and management

None of the schools visited had any really effective management strategy for securing consistency and quality of practice across classes and teachers within the RE department. Often there was a brief departmental policy statement on ICT, but this focused almost entirely on the need to improve pupils' ICT skills through RE, with little or no reference to strategies for improving their RE through the use of ICT. Many departments had no formal mechanism for identifying pupils' current level of ICT skill. They were not familiar with the specific National Curriculum ICT requirements for the pupils they were teaching.

In many schools, plans for the incorporation of ICT into the curriculum were limited because the department was disadvantaged by restricted access to computer suites, which were mainly used for discrete ICT lessons. Often, effective innovation was the product of personal enthusiasm and ICT expertise on the part of individual members of staff, in some cases derived from their NOF-funded training and in others from their personal attachment to computer technology. ICT would occasionally feature on departmental management agendas, but this was more likely to be at the level of sharing and reviewing practical ideas and increasing the quantity of classroom

applications than of formulating principles of good practice in order to raise standards of teaching and learning, or to provide criteria for effective monitoring.

Senior and middle managers often had access to very limited data beyond the time spent by classes on computers to assess how ICT was being used in departments to improve teaching and learning. In one school, an 'ICT Learning Strategy' had just been initiated and made explicit by the senior management team, with success criteria being clearly related to improvement in teaching and learning, sharing good practice through the school intranet, and reducing the workload on staff. The intention was to enable departments to access local (including in-school) expertise, and to establish areas of excellence within the school.

Although most teachers used ICT regularly for planning and preparation, few did so for assessment of pupils' progress. In some schools, ICT had improved staff access to whole-school assessment data and given students a better idea of how they could improve their work. Few, if any, schools had thought about the advantages of storing evidence of pupil achievement in electronic form.

Staff development

NOF-funded training was most effective when it was integrated into a school training programme, which gave teachers the time and support to develop their ICT skills and to apply them to the classroom situation. One school provided, through its own resources, a generous staffing enhancement in ICT during the period of NOF training, allowing one-to-one support during the school day for subject staff. This had a very positive impact on the morale of staff and their capacity to develop good classroom practice. In another school, the appointment of a new ICT co-ordinator had a positive impact through working collaboratively with staff, for example on producing multimedia presentations, as well as in extending the range of hardware and software available.

Where training was successful, teachers were given the impetus and confidence to develop new working strategies, related to the wider, more investigative, imaginative and reflective aims of RE. Too many staff, however, perceived the training to be about personal ICT skills rather than about the development of new pedagogies. As a result, some developed ICT applications which simply replicated older, ineffective, teaching methods, or saw ICT as an 'add-on' to the curriculum rather than as a means of delivering it in new and more effective ways.

Training was almost universally ineffective where staff were left to their own devices to follow a distance-learning programme. Teachers did not have the incentive to participate in online forums and had virtually no sustained contact with a trainer with specialist subject knowledge. Some completed a portfolio of work, but there was often uncertainty in school regarding responsibility for evaluating teachers' work.

Significant encouragement was given to those teachers with easy access to appropriate hardware, including computers acquired through the 'Laptops for Teachers' scheme. Another important factor was the opportunity to work where there was a good ethos of mutual support among staff and where staff were encouraged to attend training courses. Much effective training was informal, derived from specific solutions to particular

problems acquired through ‘asking a friend’ in school. In one school, the head of department won a bursary some years ago to develop ICT strategies and resources for Roman Catholic RE, and he had brought this experience to the department.

In order to move forward with ICT in RE, schools need to give greater attention to the oversight and delivery of continuing post-NOF professional development, providing a broader vision of what could be accomplished and the range of applications available for improving learning in RE. Because of other demands on them, RE teachers have not always taken advantage of specialist training courses, such as those provided by Local Education Authorities (LEAs), or of online or CD-ROM resources provided by training agencies or professional associations. Many teachers, when questioned, would welcome dedicated subject-specific training and better-produced, age-related software which matched particular curriculum objectives.

Resources and accommodation

National Grid for Learning and other streams of funding have contributed towards a sound infrastructure which has given staff and pupils good access to ICT. However, in determining priorities for use, many RE departments have found themselves low down the order, and few are able to sustain computer-based work beyond the scope of one or two lessons. In a minority of schools, RE departments have more direct access to computers, using, for instance, the shared faclilities of a humanities faculty. In one school there were four networked computers in each of two RE rooms. The RE department had also recently acquired its own data projector and digital still and video cameras.

> *There was a good example of classroom management where only four computers were available for a whole class. Normally the ICT activity was one of four different activities. In a Year 9 class investigating the lives of various campaigners for human rights, each of four groups was assigned to one (previously labelled) computer – each group chose a pair of pupils to undertake relevant research for them and to bring back relevant pictures or text in support of the final product (a group poster).*

There was often a very limited range of subject-specific software available to students. In one school, ‘e-learning credits’ have been used successfully to support the purchase of subject software and a good range of CD-ROMs was available. In one school, unusually, computer rooms were equipped with ‘Network Support Tutor’ software, very helpfully enabling teachers, from a command position, to interact with pupils electronically, with the facility to view, modify and inform pupils’ individual work, and to exhibit exemplary practice on all computers. More often, teachers used their access to the internet for their own research, including some dedicated RE sites, but were not familiar with some recent resources such as Curriculum Online. Students often had access to shared work areas and to cached web-pages on the school intranet.