Technology — a subject in turmoil?

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The new Order has been broadly welcomed, but can D&T breathe a sigh of relief now?

Why is it difficult to find a true consensus of opinions as to the direction technology should take within the school curriculum? Why did the National Curriculum initially destroy so much good technology work in schools? Will the new Orders allow enough scope for teachers to pick up the pieces?

In educational terms technology is still a very new subject, having arrived on the curriculum scene during the early eighties, and having been fought over by both the science and CDT areas. Due to the increasing burden on the science curriculum and the lack of appropriate space for the realisation aspects of technology, science departments gradually gave way to the advancing thrust of the CDT departments, many by then already well on their way to building their second BBC buggy!

This development caused a problem in itself by amalgamating all the different specialisms found in most schools. Most headteachers (and indeed ministers for education), solved this very easily: they threw everybody together and called them The Technology Department. Suddenly, teachers who had specialised in a specific area for many years could now teach computer control, electronics or food — at least, according to the timetable.

There are many aspects of D&T which are misunderstood by those who are not familiar with this area of the curriculum or the pedagogy of technology teaching. This is quite different in a number of aspects from other classroom-based teaching. How many times has someone whose teaching consists of setting the same task to the whole class hinted that you lack classroom control? Technology rooms have to allow freedom, breed confidence and decision-making skills and give space for individuality, flair and creativity.

■ The new Orders

The new Orders have been well received and will allow for proper technology to find its way back into our schools. For too long technology has been shackled by academics whose emphasis was on paperwork and 'process'. Students do have to experience the process, they have to be part of the process, but they also need to obtain the necessary skills and experiences. Technology is a very careful balancing act between the old and the new: if there is no foundation of skills, what can you build on?

I am concerned about the complete separation of IT from D&T — not that I disagree with the separation as such — but there is a danger that IT will disappear from our workshops, at a time when manufacturing depends more and more on it. I have concern too about the temporary relaxation of Key Stage 4. This is to provide time to allow schools to gear up and to allocate part of their budget on the necessary resources and INSET. But will this take place? Already, some schools are trying to turn the clock back by reverting to past syllabuses. There are, in addition, other pressing claims on the school budget and the temptation is very great for senior management teams to postpone funding for technology.

■ Technology — going forward or not?

This can only mean one thing: technology may stand still, or it may actually go backwards in the short term — at a time when technology in the real world is advancing at a great pace. We need our technological understanding and manufacturing to be of a high order, and we need to set our sights not on the immediate future but on ten, fifteen or more years ahead.

Technology in schools has been a troubled area since its conception, and now that a clearer path is being laid by technologists, we must hope that it brings about a new age in school technology.