Evaluation of Curriculum Online: Report of the qualitative study of schools

Year two

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This report is based on interviews with a range of teachers and pupils in four primary and five secondary schools in England and examines in depth how schools have responded to the Curriculum Online programme.

Strategic management of ICT and the role of the ICT co-ordinator

The role of the ICT co-ordinator in primary schools typically covered a wide range of responsibilities, with little or no designated time for the role, no support from ICT forums and varying levels of support from head teachers. All the primary schools in the study had written policies for ICT, including a number that covered the use of ICT in teaching across the curriculum.

The ICT co-ordinator role in secondary schools varied more widely, with some having designated time and the support of strategic forums and senior management, while others were expected to fulfil their roles in general non-contact time with limited strategic support. Some secondary schools had plans relating to the use of ICT in teaching while others relied on more informal understandings about the use of ICT in teaching.

ICT facilities

All schools had acquired new ICT facilities during the last year, including interactive whiteboards, new computers, upgraded network arrangements, and smaller items such as digital cameras. All schools had an ICT suite except for two primary schools, one of which was in the process of having one built. In secondary schools, there were sometimes differences in the level of ICT facilities between departments.

Technical support

Most primary schools bought in technical support from the LEA or other providers and relied on product warranties, although one primary school employed a part-time technician. All secondary schools employed technical staff and, in one case, had increased the number of such staff in the past year. Primary schools were generally satisfied with the quality of technical support. Quality of support was more variable in secondary schools. Teachers could sometimes lose confidence in using ICT where technical problems were not quickly remedied.

Training and support

Teachers in primary schools reported receiving a range of external and internal training. Secondary schools varied more in the availability of training. In some cases, teachers relied on familiarising themselves with digital materials at home while in other schools training and support was plentiful.

Training held during the school day was difficult for some teachers to attend because of timetable pressures and training held out of school hours was also inconvenient for some teachers. A number of teachers preferred training during inset days. Internal training was sometimes preferred, because this was considered more accessible, better pitched at teachers' needs and more timely.

Technical problems could affect teachers' confidence to apply the skills they had gained in training. Training was also not always consolidated by subsequent use of digital materials in the classroom. The facilitating and organising of training could place significant demands on ICT co-ordinators, especially in primary schools.

Awareness and understanding of eLCs

Respondents varied in how knowledgeable they were about eLearning Credits (eLCs). Most respondents knew that eLCs were funds for digital materials. ICT co-ordinators tended to know more about eLCs than other respondents, including the amounts of funding allocated to the school and details about the operation of the scheme.

There were three key issues around which teachers expressed particularly positive views. These were that eLC accreditation was easy to identify, that most materials could be bought with eLCs, and that eLCs had increased the level of digital materials in schools and allowed existing funding to be focused on improving ICT facilities.

Arrangements for selecting digital materials bought with eLCs
The spending of eLCs in both primary and secondary schools was organised in three main ways. In some cases, the ICT co-ordinator and/or headteacher decided how eLCs were to be spent, with varying levels of consultation with teachers. In other cases, teachers were invited to make requests from a central budget holder. Finally, in some schools, budgets were allocated to subject departments. In two primary schools there was a mixed approach involving centralised payment for subscriptions to cross-curricular resources, with the remainder being, in one case, held by the ICT co-ordinator who invited requests from teachers or, in another, devolved to groups of subjects to spend as they wished.

Centralised approaches were used to sustain subscriptions to cross-curricular resources, to upgrade specific materials, to purchase materials for new ICT facilities such as interactive whiteboards, and to ensure equal access to ICT by different groups of pupils. One ICT co-ordinator, for example, wanted to focus eLCs on a limited number of subjects so that digital materials were used in all units of work within a subject area and to ensure that digital materials were not used just by teachers with a personal interest in ICT. Some teachers unconfident with ICT or too busy to choose resources themselves preferred this approach.

Request systems did not always work well. Where there was a specific time of year that requests had to be made, some teachers felt rushed, although this enabled the ICT co-ordinator to handle all requests at the same time. In one case, teachers failed to make requests and the ICT co-ordinators had to spend the funds themselves. In another school, the process was not transparent, teachers were unhappy at having no guidance about how much they could spend, and a lack of co-ordination resulted in two teachers purchasing the same item. In yet another school, teachers could only request digital materials that served more than one department, which resulted in the language department not being able to purchase any digital materials.

The rationale for allocating subject or departmental budgets was to be fair and to better involve and engage teachers. However, one school had moved to a request system as a way of managing previous difficulties with departments over- or under-spending their budgets. Some teachers preferred to either make requests or have an allocation so that they were able to select materials that met their particular needs.

Criteria for selecting digital materials
The criteria used for selecting digital materials were similar to those discussed by teachers interviewed as part of last year's evaluation of Curriculum Online. These included being a good fit with curriculum and schemes of work, offering value for money, being easy to use, being suitable for all abilities, being engaging for pupils, having a clear educational purpose, adding value to other teaching, and there being nothing similar available free on the internet.

Some teachers spoke very vaguely about the kinds of criteria they used to select digital materials whereas others had very explicit and clear approaches. For example, in one primary school, the ICT co-ordinator had carried out an audit of digital materials in the school to identify gaps, checked that materials were QCA compatible and had pupils pilot new materials.

Reasons for digital materials falling out of use included them being faulty, not being as interactive or as easy to use as expected, being too text-based or not being suitable for certain abilities. In certain cases, problems with the school network made access difficult and changes in operating systems meant that some packages could no longer be used. Other materials were not used because teachers did not have had enough time to learn how to use materials properly.

Curriculum Online website
Overall, awareness of the Curriculum Online website remained low, with ICT co-ordinators being more likely to be aware of the Curriculum Online website than other teachers. Those who said they were aware of the website but did not use it, or did not use it regularly, said they preferred using other websites because they had only free resources or were more user-friendly. Some preferred not to use the internet to identify digital materials at all. Those who were familiar with the website said that searches generated large numbers of returns, although some said this had improved recently. Some teachers liked the fact that all eLC resources were located in the one place and that they were organised by key stage. Some thought the evaluations were a good idea, but that they were sometimes missing or not enough information was given about transferability. Others said that it was difficult to distinguish free from paid-for resources. A number also described the website as uninteresting and hard to use.

Other sources of information
Other than the internet, teachers used suppliers' catalogues, marketing materials, ICT exhibitions and subject conferences as well as word of mouth to identify and access digital materials for teaching. Catalogues were popular because they could be read in the staff room or while travelling on public transport but, compared to last year, there was much more discussion about following up initial identification of digital materials in catalogues with demonstrations or using materials on a trial basis.

Lesson preparation
Many teachers felt that there was a significant initial demand on teachers' time in evaluating and selecting digital materials, familiarising themselves with them once they had bought them and for developing lessons using the digital materials. Not all teachers were currently able to find adequate time for this. However, over time, a number of teachers thought it would be possible to build up a bank of easily adapted ICT-based resources with some believing that this could eventually free up additional time for teaching. Teachers also described how some ICT tools could shortcut activities such as searching the internet for information and pictures or designing exercises. However, a number of teachers stressed that it was important not to use off-the-shelf digital resources without adequate preparation.

Using digital materials across the curriculum
There was some evidence in primary schools of digital materials being used more across the curriculum than last year, mainly because of improved ICT facilities and the increased use of cross-curricular digital resources. However, in some secondary schools, ICT co-ordinators expressed doubts about whether all pupils were getting the access to ICT-based learning they thought they should and pointed to differential levels of ICT facilities and digital materials across, and sometimes even within, subject departments. There were also some examples of poor use of ICT facilities and digital materials, particularly in secondary schools.

Teachers talked considerably about the impact of ICT facilities on their use of digital materials in teaching. For example, teachers often said that where they had interactive whiteboards permanently located in their classrooms they used them more, integrated them with other teaching approaches and were more competent and innovative in using them. Portable interactive whiteboards were considered time-consuming to set up and also often difficult to conveniently locate in classrooms. ICT suites were highly useful, but were sometimes difficult to book, disruptive for pupils to move to from their classrooms and some teachers said it was difficult to adequately monitor pupils as they worked. Other digital equipment such as cameras and microscopes could provide teachers with new ways of teaching and learning.

Educational impacts
Most teachers found it hard to say with any certainty to what extent the use of digital materials in teaching had had a positive impact on pupils' educational attainment. However, teachers often said that they believed that digital materials could make a significant contribution and cited a range of benefits. They also discussed the limits to such potential benefits and the factors that could facilitate the most beneficial educational impacts.

Teachers and pupils talked widely about the way in which digital materials could present ideas in more visual and dynamic ways, support independent learning, increase independent access to information, increase interest and engagement and provide new ways to promote pupils' sense of achievement and self-esteem. They also often felt that use of digital materials developed computer skills that pupils will need throughout their lives.

However, teachers and pupils also spoke of a range of difficulties and limitations in realising these benefits and stressed the need for a reflective approach to using digital materials in teaching. They frequently pointed to the importance of combining the use of digital materials with other teaching methods to develop reading, writing and other skills. A number of teachers spoke about the need to clarify and manage where digital materials were used for educational purposes and where they were used primarily for entertainment. A number of respondents, including pupils, argued that teachers needed to avoid either using ICT for its own sake but that they needed to use the materials they had fully and well. Many teachers also stressed the importance of balancing independent learning with appropriate support, facilitation and engagement from teachers. Good quality ICT teaching for pupils and good ICT skills among teachers were also considered important factors in the effective use of digital materials in teaching.