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LEADERSHIP in focus
The Journal for Australasian School Leaders

Summer 2014 issue

- JULIANNE LYNCH comments on the successful implementation of iPads at Woolsthorpe Primary School, in Victoria.
- DOUG CONWAY looks at some of the unintended outcomes, for principals, of increased school autonomy and governance.
- KEVIN MACKAY asks whether the survival of performance pay is a failure to learn from the mistakes of the past.
Reinvigorating learning with iPads

JULIANNE LYNCH comments on the successful implementation of iPads at Woolsthorpe Primary School, in Victoria.

OVER the past few years, Victorian schools and parents have been scrutinising the potential of mobile touch-screen devices, such as the Apple iPad, for supporting young people’s learning, and education has become a growing market for these devices and the mobile applications (apps) they support.

Schools have historically had a mercurial relationship with new technology, characterised by passions, hopes, fears, and sometimes cold shoulders and indifference. Research literature on schools and the various waves of technological innovation that have captured their attention over the last several decades (television, desktop computing, laptop computing, interactive whiteboards, and so on) shows us that new technologies are often presented to schools amidst an atmosphere of hype and promise. However, the reality is that the uptake and impact of new technologies has rarely measured up against what is touted as the potential. This is particularly the case where technologies are championed as agents of change in school, as able to transform teaching and learning and the ways that schools organise people, expertise and knowledge. More commonly, instead of technologies changing schools, technologies are recruited to existing processes and relationships, and technological artefacts that do not easily conform to the ways schools already operate are relegated to a dusty cupboard.

But are things changing? This familiar story does not seem to be the case for iPads and other touch-screen devices that are being taken up by Victorian primary schools at a rapid rate. The iPad, with its portability, its ‘touch’ interface, and its simple navigation system, together with the huge array of available apps, seems to have taken a hold on the attention of schools, teachers, parents and students alike.

At Woolsthorpe Primary School, in Victoria’s Western Region, iPads have been embraced as a tool for doing learning differently, for putting children in control of their own learning and for engaging the wider school community. Principal Simon Perry has a vision for the school that is based on the removal of barriers and distinctions that characterise more traditional schooling. ‘When the technology is put into the hands of the children, the distinctions between who is the teacher and who is the learner are blurred because the children are positioned as burgeoning experts and they can bring together what they learn at school with what they learn in other parts of their lives,’ says Mr Perry.
Leading the way

Woolsthorpe Primary School was the first in Victoria to purchase iPads for student use in 2010 and is leading the way when it comes to exploring the innovative potential of the technology.

Mr Perry explained that ‘It’s the children who actually drive innovation; it’s about giving them the power to do that and putting the technology in their hands. The learning belongs to them.’ And the challenge to more traditional learning approaches extends to teacher professional development at the school, with students leading sessions for the teaching staff on how to use the iPads to make multimedia products.

Ms Sarah Daly is an early years teacher at Woolsthorpe and her Prep classroom was the first in the school to use iPads when they were purchased in 2010. For Ms Daly, the iPads fit well with her desire to support students to become self-directed learners:

‘I really want the children to be able to choose what modes and channels they use. What do they think is appropriate for a particular task or a particular problem? It’s about developing new literacies that include fluency with digital and networked technologies.’

In 2011, Ms Daly worked with researchers from Deakin University to explore the potential of iPads to support engagement and student voice. Her students created multimedia books by creating pages in DoodleBuddy and then incorporating their own voices using Sonic Pics. The books were then shared with the wider community via the class YouTube channel. In this way, the technology enhances communication and connections between the school and children’s homes, involving parents and making learning an engaging, creative and celebrated endeavour.

Spread of mobile technologies

Since then, mobile technologies have spread throughout the school, with a focus on enhancing the learning process. In 2013, the Grade 4/5 students created a virtual tour of the school using QR codes. Their teacher, Ms Jacqueline Fryer, explained:

‘Around our school there are POI (point of interest) posters with embedded QR codes. Visitors to the school can use their phones or supplied iPads to interact with video content to see what’s happening around the school. This sort of cross-curricular project helps students develop entrepreneurial skills for promoting ideas, creating multimedia products and engaging with the community.’

The students’ work demonstrates a high level of digital fluency, working between a range of modes, devices, apps and channels. As Brook, a grade 5 student explained:

‘I am videoing people and things about the sport that we do at Woolsthorpe. I make a movie on the iPad using iMovie. Then I upload it onto Vimeo. After that, I have to use the website www.qrstuff.com to make a QR code that links to the movie. Then you can scan the QR Code on a smart phone, iPad, tablet, or iPhone to watch the movie. It is heaps of fun!’

So why do portable ‘touch’ screen devices like the iPad appear to be defying the odds in the education technology stakes? At Woolsthorpe Primary School, we see an alignment between ideas and resources: there is a good fit between the way that teachers’ and students’ roles are being conceived, the way knowledge and expertise is seen, the efforts to make meaningful links with the wider community, and the affordances of the technology for personalised knowledge production and community-focused communication.

To support this work, the school has developed shared understandings and a shared language about learning, focused on developing understanding, fluency, logical reasoning, deep thinking and problem-solving skills, but with an emphasis on enjoyment and real life application. In 2014, these developments were complemented by a new building at the school, designed to support learning processes that put children’s learning at the centre of the roles, structures and processes of schooling. The building design complements the school’s approach to curriculum by breaking down the compartmentalisation of school spaces and providing open access to multipurpose learning spaces and learning studios.

‘We are taking opportunities to formalise the school as a community learning hub where the children participate in real projects that harness technologies, teach core literacy and numeracy skills, and build links will local industries, business, community groups, shires and educational providers,’ says Mr Perry.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Julianne Lynch is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University’s Warrnambool Campus, where she teaches pre-service programs in curriculum and pedagogy. Dr Lynch works closely with a number of schools in south-west Victoria, supporting them to reflect on and document innovative practices and programs. Her research focuses on curriculum innovation, teacher practice and emerging technological practices. She supervises research students who are interested in the sociology of technology, investigating innovation and change, and socio-technical approaches to understanding teachers’ and students’ work. Dr Lynch can be contacted by email at: julianne.lynch@deakin.edu.au.
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ARTICLES REQUIRED FOR THE NEXT ISSUE OF ‘LEADERSHIP IN FOCUS’. We are seeking short articles and education stories (from 500 to 2,500 words) from principals, assistant principals and other educationists on a broad range of education topics. Please email your article directly to the Executive Editor, Ms Debra Crouch, at debrajocrouch@gmail.com, as a plain text message or as an attached Word file. A 100-word ‘Further Information’ paragraph should be included at the end of the article. The author’s photo emailed as a jpeg file would also be appreciated, but is optional. Forthcoming deadlines for submitting articles is 1 February 2015 and 1 August 2015.

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