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A sceptic in the ranks: The Ultranet and education

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By Darryl Coulthard, Deakin University

I thought of the teachers working away on the laptops, organising their work, undertaking reports and proformas, filling in spreadsheets and answering emails. Classroom work, real teaching seems so far away. I could imagine myself as a teacher saying, 'do you want me to teach or piffle away on the laptop'? But then again I thought, everything on a laptop can be *monitored*.

I have recently been to two presentation of the new Ultranet education network of the Victorian Education Department. The Ultranet is a \$60 million dollar educational software site. The first presentation was by the project manager of the project to the ACS, the second by the Castlemaine Secondary College to the school council, of which I am a member.

The management of the project impresses me and I am impressed by the professional and thorough response and preparation for the Ultranet by CSC. Our school will be one of the best-prepared schools for its wide scale introduction this year.

I don't blame people for liking the Ultranet and the laptop in schools program. I don't even blame them for loving it. ICT promises so much to education. Kids (they are rarely called children) love computers. Information, other kids, the world is at our fingertips. It promises an ease of access to knowledge – a panacea to the sweat and

tears of study, disengaged kids, poor communication to others, prepares kids to for the new globalised and connected world, provides teachers with new tools and so on and so on. The Ultranet is, I think a pretty red-hot go, possibly 'world's best practice' attempt to bottle the thing.

Maybe, but I'm a doubting Thomas by constitution. The more the hype the less I believe it, the more sceptical and some say cynical, I get. I'm not one for evidenced based knowledge as I think it is too narrow, but I do want evidence and argument, not bluster and promotional material.

Certainly, the story of ICT is littered with hype, bluster and failure. Remember the dotcom bubble burst, any version of Windows, any new computer being just so much the answer to all your needs? And then again Myki, the RMIT people soft debacle, the French railway booking shemozzle, the Denver airport baggage handling fiasco and the list go on and on ... Information systems mostly deliver far less than promised, many end in disaster.

So what makes this any different? I ask. At the ACS meeting those present were reassured that the Ultranet won't end in a Myki (it nearly did apparently) but I did get the impression that many of the heralded features won't be implemented or put off to later.

I find the revolutionary claims made for education by ICT very much overstated and very much self-serving and any reservations or dangers are summarily dismissed.

A second thing that raises my scepticism is that if it sounds too good to be true, and as we never tire of telling our children, then it probably is. Maybe I'm sceptical too because I have worked with computers in a variety of capacities since 1976, the internet for nigh on twenty years and have taught distance education programs for around ten years. I find the revolutionary claims made for education by ICT very much overstated and very much self-serving and any reservations or dangers are summarily dismissed. Such claims need to be taken with a grain of salt. There is a huge gulf between the getting of information and the gaining of understanding, or as Socrates may have put it, the resemblance of having knowledge and actually having it.

A key argument for the Ultranet is that we now live in the information age and our kids are different and that we have to use ICT to engage them. Chalk and talk and old-fashioned approaches simply won't cut it any longer with our modern kids with their short attention spans. Topics and delivery style must be relevant, student centred and interactive. The Ultranet supports and facilitates this new approach to teaching using a 'cool' kid friendly interface.

There is some good reasoning behind this. Paolo Freire, an education professor tired

of hearing of failure to teach slum children to read, went into to the *favelas* and discovered that making reading relevant made those children willing and eager to learn and they did learn. Primary school teachers in the early years of learning found that being child-centred similarly increased numeracy and literacy. Moreover being relevant and working around the pace and interests of children make sense.

However, relevance and engagement doesn't simply or necessarily equate with ICT or always with learning. I am reminded all those years ago that the studies of the learning effect of Sesame Street essentially boiled down to teaching children to like television. The educational circumstance of a five year old is also quite different to a fifteen year old, a slum child in Brazil to a child in Castlemaine. To be sure, there is an argument to be had here, between the straw 'talk and chalk' teacher and the gushing 'I let the kids do what they want' teacher.

My point is that relevance and child centredness should be two carefully qualified aspects of teaching not a *carte blanche* licence. The sad fact is that some key aspects of learning are going to dull and where the relevance to the student isn't immediately apparent. Nor is ICT a cure for patience, diligence and hard work.

One aspect of student centredness that I find disturbing for secondary school children is that it can put the children 'in charge of their own learning'. I find it a dereliction of the duty of the adult to the child and of our culture to the future. That's our job. If we don't do it, some marketer will try to make the children grow up in their image. Sometimes we think that our own difficulties, inadequacies and anxieties about ICT and our world disqualifies us. Rest assured, in my experience at university in an information systems school suggests that our students entering university are less well prepared for using technology professionally and critically than a decade or even two decades ago.

Somewhat paradoxically, the package is being promoted as a means by which parents can keep in touch with assignments, reporting and excursion and all those things you find out at the bottom of bag with the rotten banana. "let them do their own thing" may mean watching them more closely, at least for the middle class.

I could imagine myself as a teacher saying, 'do you want me to teach or piffle away on the laptop'?

I have some further reservations, more deeply hidden. As I saw the presentations, coupled with my familiarity with similar, if lesser software was the thought that you need a pretty organised mind to use them. I thought of the teachers working away on the laptops, organising their work, undertaking reports and proformas, filling in spreadsheets and answering emails. Classroom work, real teaching seems so far away. I could imagine myself as a teacher saying, 'do you want me to teach or piffle away on the laptop'? But then again I thought, everything on a laptop can be *monitored*.

Everything teachers and students do on the Ultranet can be scrutinised. Some might say this is a good thing. For me it is a bit too Orwellian. If I were a teacher, I'd like to think I know better than a pointy-head in Collins Street or in a regional office in Bendigo for one thing. I also wonder that if we are teaching children to trust (now that might be a big if these days) then maybe we should have trust ourselves.

My final reservation is that successfully using the Ultranet by parents and students may require more rather than less social capital. It requires organisation and follow up. I recall that the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu pointing out that assignment work involving research disadvantaged the working class. Middle class kids could draw on the resources of their parents to help them do their assignments, check that they are doing their work, read teacher's comments and progress reports and make note of upcoming work and email the teacher. Absolutely marvellous for a highly organised, motivated and computer resourced home. However, one can imagine some children getting further behind as they play computer games or consume Facebook for hours rather than their homework. Indeed Bourdieu claimed that traditional chalk and talk methods were more levelling as each child had at least the same resources available within the classroom.

So I remain sceptical of the Ultranet and computers in schools. However the Ultranet is here and we have to be realistic and work with it and try as far as possible to avoid the problems that I identify and to critically but constructively adopt it. We must be like Socrates and critically evaluate our technologies. We simply cannot uncritically accept them. I think though we are fortunate because we do have a school that is rising to that challenge but help is always welcome.

Darryl Coulthard is a Castlemaine Secondary College Board Member and a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems, Deakin University

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