

Check it out!

As technology continues to advance at a rapid pace, the variety of options for the classroom can seem overwhelming, making a purchase check list a useful tool to ensure return on investment

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To ensure education is as effective as possible, it is essential that teaching and learning adapt to the use of technology that meets the needs and favoured learning styles of today's digital natives. However, one of the biggest challenges in education is that we have students who know how to use and adapt to technology, but do not necessarily apply this to learning, and teachers who can be slow to adapt to new technology, but are best placed to apply it to support learning.

It is fair to say that some schools buy technology for technology's sake. They are often misguided by companies that do not understand the wider agenda schools have to meet. Any conversation that starts with technology, and not the educational impact that is required from digital tools, should be avoided. Still more, as parents rarely understand the application of technology in schools, they are ill advised to push schools towards particular technologies.

At present, there are a number of trends in the education technology sector that are worth looking into:

Cloud-based services

Cloud will inevitably be the way forward for schools as the cost of hosted services decreases substantially over the next few years and the potential for extending learning well beyond school walls and onto any device increases. Many of the new free schools that have opened over the past year or so have begun in the cloud and look to enjoy a much lower total cost of ownership when it comes to digital resources.



Mobile technology

With the increased use of mobile technologies we are likely to continue to see a decrease in student response systems and interactive whiteboards. The cliché, there's an app for that, sits at the forefront of thinking for many schools. We are steadily seeing teachers grow in confidence and encourage 'app smashing' during lessons, rather than promoting the use of a single piece of software.

The focus is changing from 'what can you do with this application?', to 'which applications can you use to meet your learning objectives?'. The best apps are the ones that require no training and have simple outcomes that enhance the creative process involved in the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge.

Augmented reality

This kind of technology opens new doors and opportunities for connecting with a much wider and tech-savvy audience as well as delivering a wow factor. Augmented reality is all about instant access to engaging and immersive multimedia content, on demand information and simplicity. New Ways to Learn offers an augmented reality enabled school newsletter, Paper Portal, which is one example that connects schools and students' families in an innovative way.

With these trends in mind, how should schools approach technology investment? Schools need to ask themselves a series of questions:

Are we getting best value for money?

The initial price of equipment might seem a steal, but it could be lacklustre in meeting your demands. In the same way, an expensive piece of technology might set a school back, but it could be the wisest investment it ever makes. Rather than simply looking at the purchase price, total cost of ownership considers the complete cost, including the initial purchase price, performance, fit for purpose, warranty/service and support, maintenance, expected life of the product and disposal. This ensures schools are not attracted to resources based purely on their low price and that they make considered purchases.

Schools should make a note of all the components offered or involved in any purchase from the beginning through to the very end, and draw up comparisons to get a better idea of the total cost of ownership. It is essential schools strike a good balance between cost and educational value. We use a matrix against every purchase that assesses the impact of the technologies against things like Ofsted priorities, assessment for learning, meeting EAL, SEN requirements, accessibility, staff e-maturity and so on.

Will the resource meet all our needs?

It is rare for every need to met. However, does a resource meet 90% of needs? It is easy to be seduced by the glossy look of a piece of equipment, the heady promises of improved outcomes and engaged learners, without looking too much into how it achieves this, or to purchase resources that seem like a good deal when they are, in fact, not very useful in the classroom.

It is important to consider what your needs actually are and whether the technology will meet these. Do you need an e-learning resource that supports a particular curriculum area, or a multi-purpose piece of hardware that can be used over and

over again? Consider what impact you need the resource to have – perhaps improved grades or greater student collaboration – and think about what you will need to achieve this and how technology fits in.

Schools should also ask themselves when they are likely to need a resource. Is it something that students are crying out for, or could its purchase wait until the next term or school year? Or is it something a school could manage do without?

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Is it easy for staff and students to use?

It is very important that staff and students can easily use any technology a school decides to invest in. However, schools often try to force the full feature list, rather than letting teachers and students find out what best supports them and slowly getting up to speed. Just consider how many schools have taken up expensive interactive whiteboards and training only to find that staff are using the boards as normal whiteboards. This is the result of focusing on features and not on what individual teachers want from a resource.

In addition, if the technology takes a long time to set up, prepare or use, then it is not going to get many teachers onboard. There are many apps available that are free, take minutes to learn how to use and replicate software that just two years ago was expensive and required significant training. If you are a central procurer for school, perhaps consider a trial of the

technology first, getting members of staff to use it in lessons before agreeing to equip everyone.

From a student perspective, if the technology is not engaging, or if it requires constant assistance from the educator to explain how it works, students are far less likely to benefit from using it, decreasing positive learning outcomes.

What training and support is available?

Training should be the number one priority for schools investing in new technologies. Without good, differentiated workshops, teachers find it difficult to apply the digital tools to their day-to-day teaching. Support is just as crucial, as without it, accessibility will be affected. Look at what training is provided by a supplier, perhaps online videos or webinars, printed instructions, phone calls or on-site school visits? It will vary greatly and could have a significant impact.

Teachers and learners need to be at the heart of all technology purchases. Student voice should play a key role in trialling and reviewing all technologies to assess the ease of use and consider ideas for how they might be used in school. This should be followed up with a full appraisal by all teachers, whether tech-savvy or not, and not just those in the ICT or computing department. This appraisal should include curriculum mapping activities, full in-class trials, resource creation and formal training with an educational training partner.

Most good ICT providers will provide training at no cost and ensure that your investment is not wasted. Based on the reviews of staff, students and an IMPACT assessment looking at how technology will impact on teaching, learning, engagement, attainment, achievement, management, admin and working practices, the senior leadership team can make an informed decision.

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