



Technology in action

More than being just another subject, IT is a tool that has practical benefits for both teachers and pupils, supporting and enhancing learning in the classroom. Spencer Dalziel goes back to school and finds it wasn't like this in his day

From the outside, Moulsham Junior School in Chelmsford, Essex has a pastoral quaintness that belies the next-generation technology empowering children's education within.

Sixty-five years of chalk and blackboard lessons have evolved into a pilot Wi-Fi network, internet access and an ICT (information communications technology) suite full of computers and notebooks for teachers and pupils.

While this is already beyond the resources of most British junior schools, IT co-ordinator Jane Southward still wasn't satisfied with the teaching tools at her disposal. So she got permission from the headmaster to test out the benefits of teaching with an interactive whiteboard. And she had the perfect willing guinea pigs – her year five pupils.

Class act

One such pupil is 10-year-old Chloe Mills. She breathlessly explained to us just one of the benefits of the new whiteboard: "We've been doing a history project on the Tudors and Miss Southward asked us to download some information from the internet. Then she put it up on the board."

Although Jane had seen an interactive whiteboard in action before at a local primary school in Chelmsford, it wasn't until she saw the TDS Activboard at an educational technology show that she purchased one for the school.

In February this year the Activboard package, which includes the board, a Sanyo projector, an electromagnetic cordless pen that operates as a pointing device and Go Education's Boardmate software, was installed in class 5A. Jane opted for the largest board available so pupils at the back of the class could see the display clearly.

The only component not supplied by the company was the all-important PC through which the whiteboard springs to life as an interactive entity. As none of the school's existing PCs had specifications that were up to the job, a new machine had to be bought too.

Rather buy the PC from a brand-name manufacturer, the school chose a machine from the same local supplier that had installed the computers in the information communications technology suite. This decision had its benefits: "We buy computers from a local supplier

who has been able to support them on an individual basis."

Up and running

With the new PC installed, running the Boardmate software and connected to the internet, Jane now has an interactive presentation medium that operates far beyond the remit of a normal whiteboard and a black marker pen. Jane can now display dynamic content with text, animation, movies and audio, which she can annotate using the touch-screen cordless pen.

This year the school was hoping to upgrade the operating systems on all its PCs from Windows 98 to XP. Not because it wanted to but because Microsoft had ceased providing official support for the ageing OS (see page 78 for more on this) and the school simply can't afford to fly without a safety net.

Moulsham School gets a subsidy for educational licences but it's another expense to contend with and, with the majority of educational establishments subject to tight budgetary constraints, it was vital that the overall package from Go Education was a financially viable solution.



Fortunately it paid off. At £4,000 the initial outlay must have stretched Moulsham's IT budget but Go Education was extending a service other interactive whiteboard companies couldn't match and it clinched the deal.

Lowering costs

"Some companies were trying to charge every time their software was used on a different machine," says Jane, "but this one comes with a multiuser licence." This keeps extra costs down and the only extra cash Moulsham will have to find is for a spare projector lamp when the bulb in the Sanyo unit eventually gives out.

And there was a knock-on financial benefit the school didn't initially foresee. With a vast interactive whiteboard displaying dynamic content to every pupil, several of the classroom's other teaching tools were becoming superfluous to requirement. The A3 photocopier, overhead projector and video were no longer essential to lessons, so the school was saving costs on paper and maintenance.

Over the past few months the board has rapidly grown into an indispensable teaching tool and Jane is smitten with her new hardware. "We were doing a poem about an albatross in English the other day and the kids didn't know what that was. All I had to do is get some information from a website and display it on the large board. Two clicks and you're there."

Her guinea pig pupils agree. Though ostensibly a teaching aid for Jane, the children have learned the basics of the interactive board. It has an easy-to-use interface and they benefit from the hands-on approach it provides – especially when the class is maths or English.

Test results

Such is the success of the board in Jane's test class over the past few months that the headmaster has given the go-ahead to have even more installed at the school for use in other classrooms, benefitting all the teachers and pupils at Moulsham.

While the school's IT budget must take another bashing and there will be the initial period where teachers in other departments will have to revert to pupil status as they learn to use their new technology, it's already proven that the rewards will far outweigh the negative aspects. The school can look forward to increased productivity, efficient use of lesson time and better communication between pupils and teachers.

Before we left the school, we did notice a plain mini whiteboard and a black marker pen perched to the right of the 75in interactive board. Jane explained that, even with all the next-generation technology in the world, she needed to rely on some good old-fashioned writing implements to make sure the correct date was constantly on display. ■

One over the eight

There is a governmental ruling that decrees there should be one computer to every eight children in a school. At Moulsham Junior School, it's one computer to every seven pupils. That's a particularly impressive stat given that this junior school happens to be one of the largest in Essex, with the information technology needs of over 500 pupils to take care of.

Moulsham Junior School

- Headteacher Mr LR Kemp
- Deputy Head Mrs J McCutcheon
- Number of pupils 537
- IT A fully equipped ICT suite was opened in December 99 and every class uses it once a week
- 18 PCs in the suite
- 16 notebooks for the pupils
- 16 notebooks for the teachers from laptop-for-teachers initiative
- Pilot scheme Wi-Fi network

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