

Why stop there? An exploration of practitioner attitudes towards Technology Enhanced Learning

Abstract and introduction

It is no secret that practitioners in the Education sector in the UK feel bombarded with an onslaught of constant measuring, testing and re-measuring in order to meet standards which are ever changing. In the current climate of continual data gathering and analysis, can teachers ever hope to keep up when the benchmarks and goalposts are constantly on the move?

As Coffield (2007) states, “We are witnessing the main tensions within the sector being played out in the professional lives of staff i.e. Those between competition and collaboration between standardisation and innovations, between centralisation and local flexibility, between enabling and controlling strategies and between long term sustainability and short term goals and targets”

My research focuses on the pedagogical issue of practitioner confidence, with a particular emphasis on the use of educational technology in practice. We know that Educational Technology has benefits, so why are more teachers not engaging with it?

I am keen to explore the barriers which exist in order to achieve a fulfilling experience with technology in the classroom. Through anonymous surveys and interviews with stakeholders I hope to build a picture small in scale but rich in authentic flavours of the real reasons why teachers don't engage with educational technology.

As Sennett writes, a practice is something which is acquired over time – this applies directly to my research, if we wish to create artisanal practitioners then we must create an environment which allows them to flourish.

My early initial findings point to the fact that there is definitely an appetite amongst teaching practitioners for a greater understanding of how to improve their digital literacy, but they are faced with a couple of prominent and important (but ultimately surmountable) obstacles. One of these is largely an organisational issue – time. Teachers want more time to be creative and experiment with new innovations, but with growing pressures it appears that an iterative process of learning and using something new is very low down on the list of priorities. The second of these barriers is a lack of support in trying and implementing something new in their classroom. Teachers who feel supported also feel more confident – is there room for improvement in the current approach to training and support? If so, what works best in supporting our practice?

Keywords: Educational technology, Digital Literacy, Wellbeing, Continuous Professional Development

Literature review

As stated in the introduction, my initial secondary research was fairly comprehensive in dealing with and proving the fact that educational technology was useful in an educational environment, with, of course, certain caveats. It is also important to note at this early stage that the human aspect of teaching is something which a digital tool can never replace, as Butcher states “active learning still relies on a human dimension, whether the teacher is planning face-to-face or virtual interactions”.

A quote from author Douglas Adams which struck a chord with my research simply (and humorously) reads “Anything invented after you are thirty-five is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilization as you know it. Until it’s been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really”. This mindset, I believe, is one that educational practitioners wrestle with and underpins the reason why we find change hard. Robin Sharma puts it “Change is hard at first, messy in the middle, and gorgeous at the end”.

It is no secret that “digital” now impacts on almost every aspect of our lives. If we consider that industry roles such as “cloud architect”, “app developer”, “digital marketer” to name but a few simply did not exist 15 years ago, it is easy to understand that the advent of the internet being brought to the masses has impacted upon every industry. Other examples could include an understanding of e-commerce for the art industry, or the agriculture industry where agri-tech is the future. Digital is not just the future, it is now – and as educators we have a responsibility to be good role models for learners in harnessing the power it holds.

FELTAG encouraged FE providers to change radically the way they strategized and implemented digital technology in favour of large investment into Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Some practitioners were left out in the cold, whereas some were confident to make the leap to a more digital-focused way of teaching and learning. Arguably, from what I have discovered, this was a watershed moment in the digital learning landscape. The FELTAG review is, I feel, an origin point of the divide between practitioners - recognising and praising the teachers who had a firm grasp of implementing digital technology in their classrooms whilst conversely opening up teachers to criticism who had previously been praised for their teaching abilities. These teachers were suddenly having their egos dented – why were they unable to embed more digital activity in their classroom? Why was their lesson not making the most of the digital tools which were available to them? FELTAG arrived and catalysed a lot of change in the digital learning landscape, further pushing away those practitioners who felt like they were being left behind by the changes in the digital world.

Butcher writes that “Effective 16-19 teachers embrace the potential of ICT, but only where it enhances what they do in the classroom”. Educational technology is not the silver bullet, but in the hands of a skilled practitioner it can be transformational. It is of the utmost importance when deciding to employ a digital tool in the classroom that, as a practitioner, you are not just showing off the latest flashy gadget in order to prove how up-to-date you are. This “flashy use of ICT will in the end be decorative and will contribute little to the learning of all the students”. Instead, these digital tools should only be used to introduce or enhance learning opportunities - they should not be used for the sake of it. Integrating digital tools can have a positive impact on the motivation of students, for example if tasks are differentiated, individual students can work in a more autonomous way, managing their own learning and taking pride in their work. Butcher also writes in 2005 that “we are on the cusp of a revolution in 16-19 teaching”. I would argue that while the technologies and access to these tools has improved since the publication of Butcher’s work, the same fearful attitudes still persist amongst the practitioner community in adopting digital tools in the classroom.

The research I plan to carry out is fully based on this premise that there is value in the correct application of digital technology. Using this previous research as a springboard for my own ideas, I intend to look more closely at how practitioners can be supported and encouraged in using more of these tools in their own classrooms.

In the largest and most comprehensive recent study conducted by JISC into digital skills in the FE workforce, key findings concluded that the most important aspects for organisations to consider are:

- Investing in the continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers is important and should address issues such as time, recognition and reward. Teachers in colleges want time set aside to design digital materials, embed new approaches in practice and to collaborate with their colleagues.
- There are issues that relate to the digital environment which need to be addressed.
- Teachers have high aspirations - they want to use more digital (technologies)

This research by JISC backs up some key factors in my hypothesis which I am keen to explore; that practitioners would like to use more digital technologies to enhance their teaching, but due to barriers and constraints they feel disconnected and unable to implement them. I would like to uncover these barriers first hand in my research and co design a method of overcoming them.

I perceive a divide in the way in which further education practitioners operate. Practitioners who strive for quality will inevitably aim to introduce new and innovative methods and techniques in to their work. This drive for quality and “good work” is mentioned by Sennett, however he states about those who obsess: “Obsessing about quality is a way of subjecting the work itself to relentless generic pressure; workers given over to this passion can dominate or detach themselves from others less driven”. When applied to teaching practitioners, we can infer that practitioners seen as “driven” are more likely to work in isolation and not want to share the ways in which they work. This does agree with some of my initial ideas about some of the problems with the skills gap between those driven practitioners and those who are not. One of the key outcomes I hope to reveal is the ways in which successful ‘driven’ practitioners can help to enhance the overall standards of work. As Sennett states, if we wish to engender a culture of sharing and peer support then we must designate these experts to mentor in a transparent and social way, embracing those who may not possess the level of skill or expertise in pedagogy. I would like to affirm my belief that practitioners who support each other at a peer level make greater strides in progress because there is a mutual respect which naturally occurs.

I have considered also Sennett’s sentiments that craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. This a point of interest for me - I have previously assumed that practitioners who do not engage with new technologies

Research methodology

In order to robustly gather evidence to support my hypothesis, I plan on collecting evidence from a number of sources. I plan on interviewing key stakeholders involved with aspects of teaching and learning. I have identified some lecturers who are recognised as innovators in terms of digital technology and also some lecturers who are, self admittedly, not. I plan on also speaking with learners from a broad range of provisions across the college. Some of these interviews will be one to one, some will be in the form of focus groups.

I have created a “Digital Insights Survey” for my institution which will allow some extra data to be gathered and benchmarked. This will allow for more focused questions to be asked about my research directly.

I have devised a grid below which shows clearly who my data sample will come from.

Participants	Research method used
1 manager 5 tutors 20 learners	Digital Insights Survey: 200 students, 65 lecturing staff Focus groups: 4 groups of 5 students from across provision One to one interviews: 1x Manager 3x Lecturing staff 10x students

The data I gather from all methods will be collated and triangulated to ensure that if a picture does begin to emerge then this is consistent.

What you plan to do

The research I am carrying out will be undertaken at Fareham College. Fareham College is a medium-sized college on the south coast. It takes learners from a diverse range of backgrounds. The focus of the curriculum at the college is a vocational training one, many of the subjects are practical and hands-on. The college is not afraid to take a risk and invest in facilities and products which push it forwards, for example the college has a specialist engineering/marine/automotive centre of excellence and has recently developed a state-of-the-art civil engineering training centre in partnership with local employers.

The college is deemed Outstanding by Ofsted (November 2017).

One of the college’s values is “innovation”. The college does represent this at a strategic level (eg new curricula) but this value is not necessarily reflected in the day-to-day teaching which happens, especially around digital technologies.

I hope that my research will inspire practitioners, some of whom are very new to teaching having worked “in a trade” their whole lives, to have the confidence to take a risk and try something new in the classroom with the benefits of doing so laid bare for them to see. I wish to explore and understand the reasons why staff do not feel comfortable accessing and utilising the different tools which are readily available to them.

Ethical considerations

The research I will carry out will conform to the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). The guidelines exist so that researchers have a clear code of practice to adhere to in order to produce ethical research in an educational context.

For the purposes of my research, I will aim to collect data from the following categories of people within the organisation:

- Teachers
- Learners
- Managers

The nature of my research is not necessarily a sensitive subject; participants will be encouraged to be honest and professional. However, opinions and thoughts may emerge which could be seen as controversial within the organisation where the research is happening. It is therefore important to keep identities anonymous, referring to them only by a pseudonym and naming the category they fall in to.

Before carrying out research, I will seek written consent from all parties that they are happy to participate and be part of the research process. As learners are also involved in this process, I will also obtain written consent from parents where appropriate. I will advise all participants that they have the right to withdraw themselves at any point from the research without explanation and any data collected from them will be omitted from the final report. No incentives will be offered.

In order to remain transparent throughout my research, I will outline clearly the scope of the research and what it will entail including potential impacts and outcomes that might arise once the research is complete. Participants have the right to know where any data collected will be used and who is likely to see this data. The data will be held on a cloud server in order to comply with GDPR regulations.

The data and its analysis in terms of themes and categories

Digital Insights Surveys

The Digital Insights survey conducted confirmed some of my preconceptions about how staff at the institution currently used technology in their classrooms, and that practitioners recognise there is more they can do with technology, 55% of responders stated they wanted to use digital technology more.

Over 71% said they did not get enough guidance about the digital skills they were expected to have as a teacher

78.7% do not feel as though they have enough time and support to innovate. 88% feel as though there is no reward/recognition when you develop digital aspects of their role.

An overwhelming majority (90%) of free-text responses, when asked how what they would like in order to improve their digital skills, said that they wanted more time to undertake meaningful CPD sessions. Only 3% of responders said they would not engage in structured CPD around digital skills.

Interviews

The interviews conducted were the most telling pieces of evidence I gathered. They allowed me real insight into the opinions and thoughts of the lecturers and students involved. I was keen for the interviewee to remain unbiased by my own opinion in order for the results of their interview to be as authentic and genuine as possible. Below are some extracts from the interviews, which took a semi structured format.

Lecturer AS has been teaching full-time vocational students for 9 years. When questioned about educational technology, they saw themselves as quite a prominent “first adopter” in this field. Their confidence levels came, “over time. I started out terrified of doing something new in front of my students, I mean what if it went wrong? What if I made an idiot of myself? Those impressions stick with students. I had a teacher at school who choked in front of his class while eating an apple. We called him ‘Mr Apple’ for the rest of the time we were at school. Imagine if I was doing a Kahoot quiz and it went wrong... I would not want to be called ‘Mrs Kahoot!’”

I found Lecturer AS a fascinating case study; she claimed to never have had any formal training in terms of educational technology yet was confidently and eloquently able to discuss and evaluate how she employed techniques to improve her practice with this technology, “It’s all about the students being at the centre of what I do. If they’re enjoying it and engaging with it then I need to do more of it. If I don’t get a reaction or a result, then I modify my plan for the next lesson”. This highly reflective approach was something I came to see more of with other lecturers I spoke to. Lecturer AS believed that when it came to formal CPD and support around educational technology, the best approach that an organisation could take is to recognise that one size does not fit all, “It’s not about being prescriptive. People shouldn’t be told they must teach their lesson a certain way, they need to be responsive. If something isn’t working, don’t keep trying to force that square peg into that round hole”. Lecturer AS also alluded to the fact that the best CPD she gives and also receives is from her peers, with informal ad-hoc supportive conversations being the most beneficial method of reflecting and supporting. Of course, this is not possible without a culture of sharing and support and a strive to become better which backs up entirely what Sennett wrote.

Another lecturer, BW, is a self-confessed techno-phobe. He prides himself on delivering excellent lessons but shies away from educational technology. In his own words, “I just don’t click with it. I would rather not use it at all than use it badly. I have got this far without it; it seems like a lot of work to not just set it up but learn how to use it as well”. When asked how he wishes he could improve he was able to reflect, “I look at some other teachers with a bit of envy if I’m honest. I feel like I’m past it, I don’t use apps or whatever in my lessons. Should I feel guilty for not? I don’t know. Anyway, I get the results and that keeps management off my back!”. This is a typical finding which was common in the other interviews I conducted, that education is a results and target driven environment with seemingly little priority given to an iterative, reflective approach. When asked about what an organisation could do to support him in his practice, he put it quite simply “time. Time to actually learn this stuff, not just ticking a box on a CPD form. I’m actually quite open to the idea of doing more [with educational tech] but unless I devote time to it, I’m not going to get it right am I.... I’m not a geek, I couldn’t think of anything worse than learning this stuff in my own time”.

Overall the interviews with staff told a similar story about the lack of engagement with educational technologies, once the palimpsest of reasons, excuses and horror stories were peeled back it became clear that the core reasons were largely the same.

Interviews with students revealed anecdotal stories of teachers either using technology in a way which made learning more engaging, fun and exciting or lessons where the opposite was true; where

technology had been employed in a catastrophic fashion. Interestingly, many students interviewed felt that they use technology to some degree in most lessons however they were very middling about their experience overall. They unanimously agreed that they expect their lecturers to be able to use technology confidently. They also said that they wished their teachers would use new technology more, they liked the idea of helping their lecturers trial new things and help in the troubleshooting phase.

Key findings

The findings from my research have challenged my core perceptions of the relationships that practitioners have with educational technology. Previously, I had naively assumed that teaching staff did not engage with new practice because they did not want to improve. However, after discussing and reflecting with a variety of stakeholders I understand that practitioners, overall, strive to be better at what they do. This may be shrouded in some form of reluctance, negativity, or disengagement but the underlying picture (as with Lecturer BW) is that they wish to become better.

Practitioners need time, space and feedback in order to reflect and improve. The motivation to do these things is a complex and multi faceted beast; the culture of an organisation must be one which fosters this kind of intrinsic desire to improve. This culture is something which must be carefully and cautiously adopted and nurtured, it is unlikely to be something which appears overnight but instead takes time and dedication to get right.

In a lot of my interviews, CPD sessions were alluded to as being ineffective. This seemed largely to be down to the fact that the sessions were generic and often did not account for any prior knowledge or relevant industry/vocational context. Practitioners pride themselves on not only their vocational subject expertise but also their pedagogical ability, both things need to be taken into consideration when designing CPD with staff so that needs are met and engagement remains high.

Recommendations

My recommendations based upon this research are as follows:

1. **Co design a CPD programme** around educational technology which meets the needs of all. Make this programme responsive, flexible and bespoke. Practitioners should be encouraged to engage with the CPD programme in the design phase – they should be the ones dictating and determining how the programme looks and how they access it.
2. **Give staff time and space to learn, implement and reflect.** Learning a craft is an iterative process, people will rarely “get it right first time”. Problem finding and problem resolving is a key aspect of development which is largely overlooked by organisations, practitioners who wish to improve will need opportunities to reflect in order to grow. Educational technology innovations require experimentation, and that means uncertain outcomes. If we accept that innovation in education is a continual and much needed process, and should be if we are preparing people for a world that is rapidly evolving, then experimentation is necessary. This can be difficult because at times our systems and processes can seem anathema to this, with a culture that can seem dominated by measurement and scrutiny.

It is important to note that these recommendations are based on a very small sample size and that making sweeping generalisations is therefore something I am keen to avoid. I

believe I have captured the sentiments of a portion of the lecturers at my organisation but am acutely aware of the fact that there are lots of people who I didn't manage to capture. Of course, when looking at the subject of being disengaged, it is hard to guarantee that the research conducted is a fair reflection of why people are disengaged.

Dissemination strategy (appendix)

I plan to get the word out about my research by shouting about it from the rooftops!

I will present my findings to my Senior Management Team and then provide actions which could be implemented at the college. I have already presented my research early findings to the middle management layer of the college, they were enthusiastic about supporting me in getting their staff involved with the actions that have arisen as a result of the research. I have already presented findings to a Local Network Group of local colleges which generated a lot of interest.

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