

Placing ICTs in Perspective: professionalising and supporting teachers

Synopsis

This presentation locates the discussion on ICTs for teacher education and capacity building in the larger context of universal access, right to quality education and the principles of equity and social justice that should inform the architecture and design of software for the public sector as well.

With the proliferation of ICT, there has been a growing demand that it be included in school education. It has become more of a fashion statement to have computers or multimedia in schools, the result being that in spite of its potential to make learning liberating; its implementation is often not more than cosmetic. Teachers need to be sensitised to distinguish between critically useful, developmentally appropriate, and the detrimental use of ICT. For instance, if ICT is to be used to foster democratic principles and further the cause of public sector enterprises, the tools themselves will need to be guided by these principles. Often educators do not engage with these aspects. Moreover, because software decisions are usually seen as exclusively 'technological', the use of ICT in education is seen as the exclusive domain of IT experts.

The use of ICTs in education is often positioned as *the* substitute for the school teacher. It is often touted as a panacea for shortage of teachers. This view emerges from a deliberative policy discourse that holds the teacher responsible for the poor state of public education. In this view education is viewed as service delivery where learner as well as teacher 'performance' become key indicators of quality. ICT is seen to increase 'efficiency' and to ensure 'accountability' to achieve the goal of education. Inherent in this approach is the view that learning is about 'acquiring information'. What is claimed to be a 'new' discourse in education, merely shifts focus from 'rote learning' to 'learning with fun' but well within the frame of 'education as transmission of knowledge'. ICT is being positioned as the 'magic' solution to present subject-matter in 'new' and 'interesting' ways without necessarily engaging with the content either by way of questioning it or by way of enhancing perspective. The constructivist position articulated in the NCF, 2005 attempts to question this assumption. It promotes the idea that education is about the 'appropriate use' of information which is possible only when information is engaged with in order to construct meaning, perspective and understanding. This can be achieved by a teacher who has learnt to regard textbook knowledge not as an exclusive given. Such a teacher engages learners with subject content rather than focus exclusively on 'how' to communicate the 'given'. This is precisely what current teacher education programmes do not prepare teachers for.

One of the most important uses of ICTs would be to build and sustain a professional cadre of teachers. ICT can be imaginatively drawn upon for the professional development and academic support of pre-service and in-service teachers. If we want teachers to become co-constructors of knowledge and reflective practitioners, we will need to re-examine our understanding of constructivist pedagogy. For the teacher and learner this would mean rejecting the idea of subject-matter as a 'given' and bringing into the classroom ideas, experiences and perspectives of the learners in a manner that prompts enquiry and dialogue rather than mere 'acquisition' of information.

This presentation hopes to draw attention to the possibilities and challenges for teacher education and development in the digital era of public education. An attempt will be made to explore some of the critical ways in which ICT can be used to develop teacher capacities to engage with subject-matter in order to design appropriate learning experiences for learners; collate and integrate learners' responses

in the classroom discourse; integrate social contexts in designing pedagogic strategies; develop a culture of dialogue around professional practice thereby removing the intellectual isolation of teachers. Examples of teacher networks will be discussed to chart a possible path forward.