

Technology still a divisive issue in education circles



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IN 1967, I was given one promotion point for being responsible for the 'Technology Control Room' in the school.

I was now responsible for radio, TV and other 'modern' equipment including:

- A Bell & Howell 8mm movie camera;

- An epidiascope, which would project images of books and drawings on to a viewing screen by shining a bright lamp on to the object from above;

- A Gestetner Cyclograph, a stencil method duplicator;

- A Banda or Roneo Machine, spirit duplicator.

Alcohols were a major component of the solvents used as 'inks' in these machines. Even now, when I mention the word 'Banda', my fellow members of God's Departure Lounge swoon when they remember the faintly sweet and intoxicating aroma of the Banda machine!

In 1967, the school took a giant leap forward in the use of educational technology by introducing the Overhead Projector. The sales pitch was powerful - 'no more tired arms writing on the chalkboard, you can clean it easily with a tissue or paper towel and, best of all, you can keep an eye on the class as you write!'

Vocational and technological education was certainly not at the forefront of head teachers' minds when they designed the curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1963, Prime Minister Harold Wilson warned that if the UK was to prosper, a 'new Britain' would need to be forged in the 'white heat' of this 'scientific revolution'. Two years later, the Brynmor Jones Report made recommendations about vocational training and supported the use of technology. Brynmor Jones, for the first time, grouped audio visual education, programmed learning, distance learning and early work with computers under one name - Educational Technology.

About a decade later, Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, in 1976 at Ruskin College, started the 'Great Debate' about adapting the curriculum to new technologies.

It was left to Margaret Thatcher, after becoming Prime Minister in



► A school computer from 1991

1979, to advocate more directly a simple Science, Maths and English curriculum, the need for understanding about computers and their applications in the curriculum, and the importance of technology to the country's economic prosperity.

Information technology was developing slowly. It was not until 1982 that the BBC launched a major programme to support computer literacy.

Then, in 1983, there was a dramatic change to central government's approach to the vocational curriculum. The Technical and Vocational Initiative (TVEI) arrived. TVEI eventually became probably the UK's largest curriculum development programme, at around £900m.

In 1983, high level youth employment was a major concern. Employers were arguing that the school curriculum should be more about employability and preparing young people for work. The government decided to achieve their objective by directly influencing policy through funding.

Before TVEI arrived, most education monies for schools went directly to Local Education Authorities (LEAs), who spent it on their own priorities. Margaret Thatcher turned to the Manpower Services Commission to found TVEI, excluding officials and educational professionals both in central government and in the LEAs. This fresh focus on 'new technology' and, in particular, information technology, was linked to the emphasis on 'high tech' industry in the 1980s.

LEAs were involved as direct line managers and designers of TVEI schemes, though they had to follow centrally devised and quite specific guidelines. All the designs would have to be linked to subsequent training or vocational opportunities, include work experience, be responsive to local and national shifts in 'employment opportunities' and consist of both general and technical/vocational education. Each scheme should include 100 students at a time, primarily within the 14-19 age range.

It was recommended that each LEA and each participating school should appoint a coordinator.

TVEI was at its peak between 1983

and 1987, when it most certainly drove the 14-19 agenda but, from around 1988, its influence waned as the Department of Education and Science reasserted itself, eventually being killed off by the emerging National Curriculum in 1997. The National Curriculum established a statutory framework of ten subjects, with Information Technology as a strand of Design and Technology.

Increasingly throughout the 80s, Computer Studies was available as an examination subject in almost all secondary schools. The new emphasis was on problem solving, using computer applications in a variety of practical situations. It was still considered that an over-emphasis on programming skills was misplaced.

Today, the opposite is the case. The statutory guidance regarding national curriculum computing programmes of study stresses that pupils are now taught the principles of information and computation, how digital systems work and how to put this knowledge to use through programming.

The TVEI initiative certainly exposed the deep divisions that existed, then and now, about different political and ideological beliefs within education and training, particularly introducing technical and vocational elements into the school curriculum. These fundamental divisions have continued to plague British education and training policies right up to the present day.

We are still arguing about the power of technology to transform how people learn. Even though we now have whiteboards and children use laptops or tablets, there are still plenty of textbooks, pens and photocopied sheets. All desks still mainly face forward, with the teacher at the front.

Radical ideas are still being put forward, such as the 'flipped classroom' - the idea, which has gained in popularity in US schools, of inverting traditional teaching methods, by delivering instructions online outside the classroom and using the time in school as the place to do homework.

The tragedy of the demise of TVEI is that it was one of the few times that we got the balance right between central direction, local decision-making and individual creativity. It was one of the most stimulating and fulfilling times in teaching. It encouraged curriculum construction as a practical, multi-faceted, multi-level activity involving constant adaptation, modification and re-conceptualisation.

It was a middle ground between central prescription and decentralised, school-based approaches. Perhaps this was the lesson that TVEI taught us.

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