

Dear Mr Chairman,

Following a thorough reading of the Consultation Document on the Third Strategy on Information Technology in Education, I would like to submit the following comments.

The perspective that I bring to this submission is one of a teacher who is passionate about the use of ICT for learning. I have spent most of my working life as a teacher assisting others to use technology effectively with students. I spend a lot of time working as a workshop leader for the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR where, amongst other things, I spend time introducing teachers in Hong Kong schools to the ideas of using technology to provide real-world authentic learning experiences for Hong Kong children.

I am very excited by the fantastic tools that are now available for teachers to use with children. In particular, the vast range of Web 2.0 tools that are available. For possibly the first time in the use of technology in learning, the cost of the software is no longer an issue with schools, as there are now tools to do most of the things that schools might like to do available either freely or for minimal cost.

Access is now also disappearing as a limiting factor as machines such as the XO machine being developed by the MIT team lead by Nicholas Negraponte or the Intel Classmate PC make the concept of 1:1 access to technology within the reach of even the poorest developing nations.

All this is leading us to a time that is unprecedented in terms of having an opportunity to fundamentally change what learners do in classrooms with the assistance of technological tools. The indicators are that we are approaching one of those turning points that Jared Diamond talks about in his book "Collapse". Like many of the turning points referred to in the book, decisions made right now will be crucial to what happens in the very different future that lies ahead for us.

Against a backdrop of changes such as this, my first comment is that the consultation document, in my opinion, fails to give schools, who are grappling with curriculum reforms, medium of instruction and enrolment issues and may not have technology champions on staff, any clear direction and guidance about where to invest to make best use of money to achieve the lofty student-centered ideals set out in the Prologue.

The prologue makes mention of peer to peer exchange and the utilization of Web2.0 applications for enabling what might be described as "student voice". Unfortunately, very little mention is made in the action plans about enabling the use of Web2.0 applications or in scaffolding access to the tools which support and enable student voice. In my observations, schools in Hong Kong will not just "pick up" the use of these tools as a result of a few staff members attending training sessions and an injection of funds. There needs to be deliberate direction from above that the use of such tools leads to the reform that the EDB wants to see in its schools.

Secondly, as I mentioned in the consultation meeting of November 13th, there are some initiatives worldwide that require a commitment from central agencies to bring to fruition. The most obvious of these is the one laptop per child initiatives of the OLPC organization and the similar initiative of the Classroom PC picked up by Intel. This is allowing for the supply of WiFi enabled portable PC devices for under US\$200 provided that agencies sign up for volumes (last week Uruguay signed on for 100,000 and the government of Lybia signed on for 150,000). There is no scope in any action plan to allow for any sort of volume purchase here in Hong Kong. You have mentioned that in the document that the ratio of computers to learners in the HKSAR is a poor indicator of what is really happening in classrooms. Why is Hong Kong turning its back on 1:1 devices being used in core subjects? This movement is occurring in every developed country in the world. See <http://tinyurl.com/yooyb2> Apart from a few schools trialing PDA devices, I know of no local Hong Kong school doing a series trial or pilot on the use of laptop computers, owned or assigned to students on a 1:1 basis for a term or more being used in core subjects. You must be aware that there are 4 international schools doing this in Hong Kong and many more are planning it. Why are you not giving direction and supporting a trial?

From my experience in visiting a lot of local CMI schools in Hong Kong and working with a large number (in excess of 200) teachers of English in Hong Kong schools, I see two main shortcomings for the use of IT in Education in core subjects in schools. The first of these is the access to technology by students in mainstream (no IT subject) classrooms for learning. Action Point 4 may go some way assisting in this area as it does say “mobile learning” devices as one of the areas that schools might like to spend technology grant money on. The problem is that this is unlikely to happen if it is just one of a series of areas that the school has needs in. Given that the rest of the action plans relate to the needs of teachers and the schools, it is unlikely that much of this funding will find its way to being used for providing devices for learners.

Much of the document seems aimed at doing a lot of the things that are now outdated in other parts of the world. Whilst I applaud the intention of things like \$25 million in funding to produce modules of work in Chinese, Mathematics, English etc, I would point out that I also regularly visit schools in the UK US and Australia that have an enormous amount of software sitting on shelves in schools being under utilized. The reason for this is that hardware, operating systems, learning management systems and, even content delivery systems move on and the content requires major updating to adapt to the changes. In most cases, the schools just source new content. This is an old model which is wasteful of resources.

The new wave of initiatives taking off in forward-thinking schools and systems is to create professional learning communities and strong communities of practice that share information on resources available. We have long known that the best way to learn something really well is to have to teach it. There are a large number of collaborative partnerships such as those of the Howe Public Schools in Oklahoma <http://www.howeschools.org/> where students can make learning resources for other schools who wish to learn some content on a topic. Funding this sort of initiative or leading an initiative where one third of your teachers in schools in Hong Kong are working toward a PhD as a part of the way that they share, create, guide and learn in their school environment, such as in Professor Stephen Heppell's UK initiative (speaking at a recent Scottish Learning Festival <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/slf/transcripts/stephenheppelltranscript2007.asp>) has to be money much better invested for the betterment of Hong Kong's future.

Again, another idea in the area above that needs to be looked into closely is the large number of US schools now using Nettekker™ as a way of having access to the vast number of resources available over the internet. Nettekker™ allows for teachers to access these and peer reviews of them in a way that is fast, easy and relevant to the standards of the curriculum that they are teaching. <http://www.nettrekker.com/>

There is a real opportunity here to show powerful leadership at a very exciting time for the world in terms of the emergence of many great technologies which may be utilized for learning. We cannot simply disregard the knowledge construction theories and return to an outdated emphasis on knowledge transmission by funding the development of software resources presumably to be used in traditional, teacher-directed ways. We have to encourage Hong Kong's learners to develop their own voices and hone their questioning skills.

Please feel free to contact me should you require clarification or elaboration on any of the points that I have raised in this submission.

Regards

Paul

Paul McMahon
Managing Director
Learning Solutions Asia
Unit 1006
Hua Qin International Building
340 Queens Road Central
HONG KONG
Tel: +852 81702808
Fax: +852 30152852
Mob: +852 91705605
Email: pmc@learningsolutions.com.hk
Web: www.learningsolutions.com.hk
Blog: xpatasia.edublogs.org