DEMAND Part 3: practitioners who are reluctant to use digital technologies in classrooms.

The sample

In this section the report deals with the lack of demand for digital technologies from some practitioners. In contrast with earlier studies conducted by the same researchers, it was quickly found that the term 'technophobe' can no longer be considered as a description for practitioners who are reluctant to use digital technologies in classrooms. ICT leaders were asked to select practitioners they knew who were open about their doubts about ICT in education and would be willing to undertake a telephone or Skype interview about their views.

This section covers the key issues raised by twelve reluctant practitioners who represent a range of professional status from new teachers to heads. Some of their views have been quoted in the other Demand sections. In this section, any relevant issues raised in the focus groups are included.

The cohort represented both genders in the primary and secondary sector and covered a range of ages, specialist subjects, regions and pedagogical disposition. Whereas no consistent picture of a reluctant professional emerged, these professionals with reservations can no longer be classified as technophobes or as professionals with limited computer skills. They all had an email address that they checked daily and they were all able to use basic computer software and search the web efficiently. In particular they all used computers to complete a variety of personal objectives: booking tickets, downloading music and audio books and engaging in social networking at home. Their profile was indeed similar to the twenty-nine practitioners who answered the main questionnaire.

Their professional reservations, however, which were carefully considered and well articulated covered a range of issues:

- threatening e-safety considerations;
- anger about the futility of much unused data collection coupled with security fears;
- poor quality of equipment and internet support;
- unreliable administrative systems;
- lack of support when new systems are adopted;
- draconian and illogical filtering systems;
- lack of details and demonstrable pedagogical benefit;
- clashes between interoperable systems;

- the lack of explicit pedagogical principles which promote deep learning in educational software design;
- the lack of availability of time to experience with new ICT tools;
- lack of appropriate formal or informal CPD;
- the difficulty of finding the networks of colleagues working on similar issues.

Some of these points are illustrated by one teacher who was reluctant to engage with computers. She explained that she was unavoidably introduced to computers very late in her career. In compulsory courses word processing came up over and over again. In the end she took a valuable NUT course. The model suited her as it was run over a term and sessions took place in evening.

The design combined one to one instruction with frequent reference to the handbook so I could go along to the first few sessions and could embed the learning about the internet, emailing, IWBs, and very basic desktop publishing. I was awarded accreditation in the Office package. I can now judge the course as very basic and am very impressed and in awe of the youngest members of staff. The trouble for people like me in coming to computers late is that this is a journey of self discovery in the basics have not been done.

Another reluctant teacher found the technical staff either condescending or unable to understand what she did not, and could not, know:

ICT experts tend to assume background knowledge and begin without practical work I do not have the skills to undertake. Unfortunately our anoraks did not know when they have lost people- we really need a fools guide to refer to all the time. The kinds of courses that work are when primary school teachers listen to feedback from other teachers that are practical. Sharing between staff is very important as well as a ICT coordinator who is not also a full time class teacher. We often do not want to ask her to help as this disrupts her class.

Another teacher of English in a hospital school was typical of those reluctant teachers who resisted the notion of learning about digital technologies in depth. She had never wanted to learn about computers even though she was not technophobic. In her view she had better things to learn professionally than to invest significant time in mastering digital technologies. This teacher admitted that she might feel differently if she had a large class and had some key targets to meet. However, in her role in the hospital she did not see learning how to use digital technologies as part of her job just as she did not expect to do more than drive a car. The engine was not her concern. She was, however, far happier to use digital technologies in her classroom as she had an assistant teacher to set up the computer and the IWB. The students loaded the software so that all she had

to concern herself with was her relationship with the pupils. Once she had this kind of support she was willing to harness the advantages in her own teaching.

Social isolation

Another teacher of English saw social dangers when pupils are isolated in front of a screen. Her strong professional belief was that the most important aspect of her work was her interaction with the pupils and her interaction with them.

She became concerned when the screen was dominating the situation although she was happy to use a whole film or some clips to make literature more real.

Mechanistic data collection and report writing

One ICT practitioner had moved from a private school into a state academy with an ICT specialism. He had a Masters in ICT in Education and felt that he was not receiving any further ICT training from the school.

He felt that computers are used as part of an assault on teachers' professional judgement, and that computer administration and data collection about students was at the core of this situation. He did not like the emphasis on record keeping and lesson planning either.

E-safety

This was a contentious issue with strong advocates for more freedom and others for more control. One ICT practitioner commented on his school technician's preference for locking down the systems for security reasons:

Awful IT is bogged down with databases, spread sheet teaching skills. Data manipulation should be reduced. But good IT means using Web 2. Teachers who against social networking teachers put their heads in the sands and teach children to be afraid and then battle with home access. Can the kids police this? They do this at home. All is banned. Teachers should be teaching children how to use Face book and Twitter properly, not ban it.

IT courses could be helping pupils with all this security understanding what the social stuff is and understanding 13plus ethics and the morals. Teachers would be more confident if they had lessons in this kind of area.

These services are not illegal and yet very strong IT departments want to say no. They like closing stuff down. What schools really need is creative systems that are more open like Macs. They do not get viruses like PCs.

In our school we have 1,000 computers to 2,000 children. Can this be positive? I can go home and get on with my personal computer. Yet we are teaching kids the 1995 model with computer suites and no Web 2. And this is a famous new-build academy with an ICT specialism. What is happening here?

Another practitioners' school preferred to avoid the dangers of social networking and accessing inappropriate sites:

We do not use social networking and chat because we are a Catholic girls schools and I am in favour of this. What they do at home is their problem. We have no plans at all to use the chat facilities which is a problem for media and the firewall is so strong that the 'A' level students cannot do their research and I cannot read websites. It's a price we have to pay for safety.

Fear of public failure

A teacher in Southall complained about the culture of schools: *As it is now you cannot close your door. When the computers go wrong it is very public and embarrassing. I feel for young students in these conditions*.

Inappropriate presenter styles and disturbing noise

The design of software that was intrusive in the classroom was another area of concern: *I was also worried about some 'all singing and all dancing' software where adults are too jolly and childish. There is often far too much jangling noise and not much thinking behind it. Programs based on multiple choice designs are particular culprits.*

Incitement to violence

Other teachers who were reluctant to use computers in schools had some concerns about the gaming culture. One teacher who had sons said: *Is digital technology different from other kinds? My teenage boys are listening to gunshot and playing adventure games with a violent theme much of the time. What do we know about the impact of this violence on their future behaviour?*

Assessment and testing

Within the group of teachers reluctant to use computers in the classroom the main complaint was about the national examinations and assessment systems and local testing.

I feel as if I am trying to everything with few resources. Too much to do with too many lessons - too many things and too many responsibilities that I cannot do all together. The targets are too high. They are expecting too many grades. Exam machines; children are pressured as well. So many of them are being failed all the time. Labelled as failures. Too many schools are manipulating the figures to meet targets. Yet qualifications are not worth as much as they were.

Some resented the increasing involvement of computers in examinations and testing. Several of these teachers considered mechanistic exams including multiple choice testing to be a main barrier in the adoption of new ways of working with ICT.

One respondent was unhappy about computer-based assessment without consultation with the staff:

This exercise involves terrible clicking on meaningless phrases. Is this supposed to make me more discerning? I was quicker in writing my own sentences then choosing from other people's standard phrases. Do we really know if computerised reports are better? Teachers live and die by assessment. Computerised tick boxes compromise our professional judgment. SATS at key stage 2 should certainly go. This is when the judgement of teachers is paramount. A teacher should know what is needed to do to take the child to the next level. I do approve of higher levels of accountability in schools and computers have facilitated the efficient collection of necessary data as evidence ... but designs are poor and vital judgements get lost.

A contrasting issue raised were assessment requirements that do not include the demonstration of ICT competence in subject areas. In the focus group participants felt that until this was the case and until assessment values some of the ICT skills pupils are developing outside of school, teachers who are reluctant to use new technologies or just not confident in using them can always excuse their attitude with reference to assessment requirements. Teaching to exams was seen as the enemy of creativity and experimentation.

A false sense of achievement

One reluctant teacher, a primary literacy coordinator, spoke for many when she expressed her pedagogical concern about over-use of computers creating a situation where passive learning becomes the norm.

I warn my team about passive learning and the dangers of reducing opportunities for speaking and listening especially as we have so many pupils for whom English is a second language. Computer must not be seen as a substitute for books. But I did say that the computer can be helpful for the reluctant reader. I certainly saw strugglers who ended up using presentation software to explain to the others what they had done. The pupils did want to get the text right if they were showing the rest of the group. In these circumstances they were much quicker at picking up the mistakes. Pictures from the internet were also valuable in the early stages of learning English. However I also warned against Death by Powerpoint.

Another teacher was concerned that children think they are very computer literate but they bring in printed pages from the internet that they cannot read or that are too sophisticated in content for them.

Research for project should be a case of explaining what you have read and understood to others. But many pupils now indulge in passive learning. They learn a few tricks that make it look as if they have digested the information but this is far from the truth. This 'know it all' generation needs teachers who are de-skilled in understanding the issues in order to gain good marks. Unfortunately it looks as if this is happening.

Pressure to be sociable

In her personal life another teacher did not like online banking or social networking - even though she had been invited to join FaceLift for the over fifties. She did not want the 'tyranny' of attending to 500 friends. The pressure to create these superficial evidences of 'friends' and popularity was a major problem developing that she saw - especially in primary schools. To an alarming extent, in her mind, pressure on young children and teenagers to be pretty and have friends was generated by communications technologies.

Changing perceptions of ICT in classrooms

Focus groups raised questions about new-build schools and the lack of ownership that they and the pupils feel when they are transported into a new environment that has not always been well set up for professional or student learning. Five areas of consultation were suggested that had should be considered by the whole school in cooperation with the architect: These were: the design of the physical space: the balance of spending on traditional learning and digital technologies; appropriate ICT CPD; finance and resource; levels of connectivity within and outside the school; security issues; professional attitudes - making sure that all voices have been heard including those who have valid concerns.

What was hopeful within this group was the indications of changing perceptions about the pedagogical potential of digital technologies as this group gained more familiarity with computers, were provided with better and more reliable equipment and moved into newly built schools. One primary respondent had begun to feel more positively disposed towards computers in classroom when her school moved into a new building two years earlier. The computer systems suddenly became reliable when before they had been reliably unreliable. She had also been given planned courses on basic skills and IWBs that lasted five weeks each. In these courses she had been given one-to-one tuition as and when she needed this. This had made a significant difference to her attitude towards computers in her last year in school.

In her words: *I surprised myself that I was quite positive about computers after the move. This shift in my thinking was predictable because when the facilities are better you are able to be more discerning choices and also bank on reliability.*

This teacher, who had retired two months before, had found more time in retirement to gain personal mastery and confidence. She was developing skills, pleasure and interest in emailing, social networking and digital photography now that she had the time. She had the luxury to fail without feeling she was impacting on her pupils' potential achievement in exams. These comments indicate three of the barriers that caused her negative approach to computers at achool: unreliable equipment, lack of time and fear of failure.