

Digital Advantage

The characteristics of a Digitally Advantaged School

In a previous article entitled [Mind the Gap](#) I explored the growing digital divide between schools. Here I wish to define the characteristics of a school that has managed to secure a position of digital advantage.



The factors that contribute to digital advantage are many and varied. For instance, a school's ability to introduce and manage a change management programme; the availability of resources to introduce, support and sustain a rich and varied ICT environment or the sponsorship and support received from the school's senior leadership team can all contribute to the success or failure of a school's ICT strategy. Whilst recognising the importance of such factors, I wish to focus on a narrower and more specific set of characteristics. The purpose of doing so is to draw attention to a number of overarching ICT strategies that can lead to significant and powerful changes within the education setting of any school or group of schools. These traits are recognisable in a school that has secured digital advantage.

An affordable and sustainable model for financing ICT

A sound financial platform enables a school to access, utilise and nature its resources so that it can secure and maintain a position of digital advantage. Traditional models for financing ICT have been abandoned and replaced with financial models that enable digitally advantaged schools to flex and mould to meet local and national trends.

Financing, maintaining and extending ever more complex ICT services has always been an issue for schools. Funding pressure over an extended period of time has meant that schools have learnt to be more considered in how they acquire their ICT equipment and services. A growing number of schools are questioning the rationale of a capital only spending programme and seeking spending routes that are more manageable and which guarantee a greater level of security going forward. One such model is Hardware as a Service. This model enables schools to access the full array of ICT services such as infrastructure components, servers, switches, end user devices, software licenses, and much more, all through a recurring monthly, quarterly or yearly fee, with no up-front costs to the school.

The resources required to build an ICT infrastructure that can cope with the demands of a modern education setting has all too often been out of reach for all but the larger schools. However, schools who have established or who are members of an active and participative schools network are in a position to establish and take advantage of shared networked services that are affordable regardless of their size. The centre of this digital network is typically a secondary school which hosts networked services on behalf of primary schools who are closely affiliated with the school. The primary schools benefit by accessing affordable networked services for an agreed annual fee with the larger secondary school. Members of this participative network also benefit mutually by sharing the cost of ICT staff and professional development. Digitally advantaged schools go further and open

up the management of wireless networks, print services, cashless catering and online payment systems across their participative schools network.

It goes without saying that effective financial modelling and planning underpin the success or failure of a school to maintain its digital advantage. The financial maturity of a digitally advantaged school enables it to focus on the return on investment on ICT rather than cost alone. Such schools have a greater level of understanding of the educational benefits that can be accrued when investing in ICT.

Ubiquitous computing

A digitally advantaged school by default provides ubiquitous computing to all its staff and students. Anything short of this compromises the ability for the school to achieve or to maintain its position as a digitally advantaged school. Ubiquitous computing is more than providing a networked device to every student. It is about empowering individuals to become active, engaging and willing participants in the school setting.

We live in an age where the pressures to re-invent the education system and the paradigms that support it have never been greater. One of the key drivers for that change is the availability, affordability and the growing maturity of education technologies. Whilst we accept that educational innovation is not wholly dependent on technological advancements; increasing recognition must be given to the fact that education technologies and services are playing an ever more important and valuable role in determining the shape of the education landscape. One particular area of interest is the part that ubiquitous computing plays in enabling learners to have greater self-determination and a more active and participatory role within the education setting and how we determine and assess technology's role in democratising education.

The efficacy of technology to democratise, customise, adapt and transform education will be one of the primary conditions for achieving the kinds of educational outcomes needed to build a thriving digital knowledge economy. If these pre-conditions are not in place there is a danger that the education orthodoxies of today will threaten and undermine the opportunities available to graduates as they attempt to become active participants in the modern digital economy.

Digitally advantaged schools that sponsor, support and foster technological development and growth within their participative schools network will see will greater opportunities for democratising schooling and learning. They recognise that their learners do not just want more choice, they want more of a say. Their students are not just passive consumers of content or of learning objects; rather they are active participants, contributors and players in their networked and connected school. The digitally advantaged school entails that teachers and learners are no longer isolated from the community and the economy around them.

There are many benefits for schools if they facilitate, promote and foster effective learner participation through connected technologies; and we need to recognise that ubiquitous computing must be a precondition if schools are to achieve and maintain a position of digital advantage.

A broad curriculum that meets the needs of learners and the knowledge economy

The investment that digital advantaged schools have made in ICT has enabled them to move their focus away from technology to the educational benefits that can be realised from ubiquitous computing. The growing maturity of ICT services within the education sector has enabled digitally advantaged schools to think more broadly when designing, developing and implementing new curriculum models and programmes of study. The continuing rise and pervasiveness of the knowledge economy and its demand for a workforce that is educated

and trained in the use and application of new technologies has prompted digitally advantaged schools to develop and deliver new curriculum models and courses in order to equip their students to enter the knowledge economy.

Digitally advantaged schools will increasingly leverage their ICT resources to enable them to develop a curriculum model that meets the demands of the knowledge economy. Emerging curriculum models are enabling schools to further extend their digital advantage. Students who attend digitally advantaged schools become active participants in their own learning and their learning is increasingly being directed towards the world beyond the school gates. This is enabling them to have the opportunity to be economically engaged, to be qualified participants in the knowledge economy and to be actively involved in the wider society. Digitally advantaged schools have recruited specialist staff, established strategic links with one or more ICT partners and with further and higher educational establishments and devised programmes of study that are attractive to the student body.

Digitally advantaged schools offer a broader range of courses to their wider community. They accept the need to move the focus away from nationally prescribed curriculum subjects that tend to be rather orthodox and which were designed to meet the needs of an economy that no longer exists. Digitally advantaged schools recognise the long term value of providing a broad digital curriculum that provides attractive and appealing vocational pathways for their students.

Digitally advantaged schools no longer specialise in a single subject strand. They have extended their digital advantage by providing dedicated and specialist resources across the full breadth of their curriculum offer. They are able to do this by leveraging partnerships that they have developed with organisations that are leaders in their own fields.

Partnership is the norm

Digitally advantaged schools are successful because they establish, maintain and foster a wide range of partnerships across various sectors.

Digitally advantaged schools are at the centre (typically a secondary school) or a part (typically a primary school) of a participatory network of schools. The benefits of belonging to such a network are not just financial; rather the membership of such a network is a precondition to being a healthy and vibrant school within the larger community.

Collaboration between schools in this participatory network is not just centred on shared networked services. Digitally advantaged schools, by their very nature, collaborate extensively with other schools. It is part of their DNA. The digitally advanced school accepts and acknowledges the requirement to work collaboratively in order to drive forward educational innovation.

Digitally advantaged schools recognise the value of education ICT capital. I define education ICT capital as technologies, pedagogy, rituals, habits and norms that all come about because of the application of education technologies in schools. Education ICT capital fosters, encourages and enriches creativity, collaboration and learning. In nearly all cases a school's education ICT capital is enriched when they work in partnership with a diverse range of partners and this is very much the case for a digitally advantaged school.

Summary

The factors that determine a school's ability to become a digitally advantaged school are multifaceted and interrelated. What matters is not the technology itself, but the social and cultural setting within the school and its ability to manifest the characteristics of a digitally advantaged school. If a school is able to promote and drive positive change among its staff and students the more likely it is to achieve the status of a digitally advantaged school.

For further information
contact Aftab Hussain

Web: <http://www.aftabhussain.com>

Email: info@aftabhussain.com

Twitter: @Aftab_Hussain

Phone: 07889 904 500