

Practical ICT

For Leaders & Managers of Educational Technology

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Leading Edge to Leading School: Taking your Learning Platform Forward



Fiona Aubrey-Smith, Education Development Consultant at UniServity, considers how to involve other teachers and their classes in using the school's Learning Platform.

So you have a brand new Learning Platform, and you're excited about the potential that you've seen it can offer to your school community. You've tried a few ideas in your own classroom, and perhaps even persuaded others to have a look, or to logon. How do you translate this into a whole-school project? Here's a

5 step journey to get you thinking!...

1. Let go...

Imagine you've just spent hours, days, weeks even, tidying up the PE cupboard so that everything is nicely organised, labelled, in a logical place, looking clean, well laid-out and generally great. You know exactly where to find everything, you've shown colleagues proudly where to find equipment and how best to put it back, and you're feeling a sense of achievement.

Then... You're on PPA time (non-contact time) and you hear Year 4 (age 8-9) in the hall playing hockey, and you find yourself thinking:

"I hope they put everything back in the right place"...

Hang on... Who decided what the 'right place' for hockey sticks was? Did you have a whole-school vote? Did you debate it with Year 5 (age 9-10)? Did a child from Reception (age 4-5) win a competition to decide? No. Then, maybe, just maybe, the hockey sticks would actually be far better stored in that dusty corner behind the door where Year 4 have just deposited them in haste; awkward to get to, but keeps them upright and not falling all over the floor.

Do you see where this train-of-thought is heading?

When engaging your staff, even the most reluctant, afraid, or disengaged teacher, you'll need to give them the same ownership that you had when you began your Learning Platform journey – maybe even **more** ownership than you had. That ownership might be an area of the Platform, it might be a whole-school project (the PE coordinator carrying out a discussion forum or survey on where those hockey sticks should be best kept!!), or even a small class project.

The most important factor is that this member of staff feels the owner of that space. Do not interfere – however tempting it is to 'amend' or 'improve' something on their behalf!! If you see what's going on and you have an idea, use your professionalism to know when to share your experiences and thoughts, and when to hold back to enable your colleague to discover for themselves. What happened when you were at this stage? Would you have changed that process?

2. Provide Scaffold



So your colleague now has an area of their own in which to begin their Learning Platform journey. How can your experiences support them without interfering in their professional development and judgement?

Let's use a metaphor again. If you're teaching your 6-year-old nephew to make paper aeroplanes, do you announce one morning that he must learn to make an aeroplane and he's going to look at the brilliant aeroplanes you've made right now because you've decided the time is right? Exactly...

Perhaps instead, through discussion, you'll know what your colleague is currently wishing to improve in their teaching & learning provision; perhaps they are focusing on boys reading, able child differentiation, engaging parents, or they might be the literacy coordinator and have started a book club for example. Think about how the potential of the Learning Platform can help your colleague to deliver their existing aims. This way the Learning Platform is not "something else we have to do", but instead it's a ready-made solution.

So once you have an idea about how the Learning Platform can support your colleague, then is the time to share examples of other schools doing this; the brilliant thing about what's going on around the world right now is that everyone is starting somewhere different so there is a wealth of exciting examples. Once your colleague has seen an example from another school meeting their own goals, they will hopefully see the potential and then ask you for support to get started. The drive will have come from them, not you.

3. Have a go

When your colleague begins to explore and try-out the tools with which to deliver their goals through the Learning Platform (let's use the example of setting up a whole-school Book Club), then once again you have an important role. Once your colleague has seen the bigger picture, the example from another school, then they will need to learn how to use the relevant tools to make this a reality in your school.

This is a great opportunity to learn together if you haven't done this kind of activity before. Perhaps your colleague wants to set up a Book Blog as part of Book Club, and you might not have tried using blogs before. Have a go yourself before you show your colleague so that when "training" them, you know what you're showing – the last thing you want is to lose their excitement while they wait for you to click the right place.

Using this Book Club example, it might be worth your running a Book Blog with you a group of your own children as a form of differentiation within your own class, but also to try-out the experience in order to empathise and support your colleague. This way, you are both developing professionally. If you're doing this with a number of colleagues, your school is really making headway.

4. Celebrate

What do we do when children reach milestones? We praise them, we celebrate their achievements – we give them public recognition for their hard work, patience, effort and success. Why do we assume colleagues will not appreciate the same acknowledgement?

When my wonderful Teaching Assistant gained her First Aid certificate she was presented with it in our school celebration assembly, so that the children, staff and parents could share in her achievements. There are those who would happily shut you in the art cupboard if you even suggested they stand up in assembly, but that does not mean that they don't want recognition for their efforts.

Using the Book Club example again, perhaps your colleague has run a Learning Platform Book Review competition – the winning children might be presented with certificates in assembly so that they and their families share in their achievements.

When presenting, you, or your Headteacher could highlight the superb efforts that your colleague made in creating this opportunity for the children. If you have several colleagues all trying different ideas perhaps a 'Wall of Learning Platform Success' in the staffroom could provide the opportunity to add post-it notes with

successful ideas that colleagues want to share, or anecdotes from the children (which actually, if you read between the lines, reveal as much about the teacher as about the child).

5. Recycle

What now? It's time to go back to Point 1, and apply what you've just learned to your next 'group' of people. Over time, try to provide ways in which Teachers, Teaching Assistants, Administrative Staff, Kitchen & Cleaning Staff, Governors, Parents, Wider Families, Local Businesses (externally provided Ballet Clubs, Beavers, Nature Club, French Club etc), and the Wider School Community, can all be part of your Learning Platform – the more the merrier!

Make sure you think through the related e-safety issues that come with each of these groups, and ensure that you simply put into practice the precautions and policy driven protection that you would provide to safeguard the children in your school if these same people were to physically be in school.

What an exciting time you have ahead. You're about to drive the most innovative, positive, engaging learning experiences for your whole school community. If you get it right you'll transform your school, and probably learn a few things on the way!

“To have a revolutionary idea, is to accept that at least 50% of people will think you are mad.” (Anon)

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The leadership dilemma: what sort of leader should you be?

Every so often this question is raised. It actually subsumes several questions, such as:

Does a leader need to be dictatorial, or democratic?

I have always tried to be the latter, but every so often I have come up against,

“Why are you asking us? You're the one getting paid to take the decisions.”

I do actually think that reflects their personal issues rather than anything objective, because they are also the same ones who say, when I **do** simply announce something,

“Shouldn't you have asked our opinion first?”

Should a leader be able to take decisions quickly?

Interestingly enough, this has proven to be a surprisingly popular answer in the leadership survey I set up (more of which below). Personally, I would not have thought this is crucial: how many times does a leader need to make decisions **quickly**? I have occasionally been asked if I can spend £5,000 by Wednesday,

but I always have a shopping list in my head anyway: the decision, in other words, has already been made.

In fact, I think a lot of problems arise in schools because leaders and managers take decisions **too** quickly. Perhaps a better option in the survey would have been “Ability to take decisions **slowly**”!

In the UK, there is far too much emphasis on visionary leadership. I think the same is true in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand too, judging by the sort of keynote speakers they have at conferences. Great speakers, but could they provide a leadership role in what I call a “real world” situation? I think both types of ability are needed: the ability to inspire, and the ability to take practical decisions.

I don't want to say too much about leadership at this stage for fear of unduly influencing the results of the poll I set up. A lot of people have responded, and the results so far have taken me by surprise. I will reveal all soon! In the meantime, if you have not yet taken part in the survey, please do so. There is only one question, so time will not be an issue! You will find the survey [here](#).

Advanced motoring as a metaphor for advanced teaching and management

What **is** advanced motoring?

Here in the United Kingdom we have several organisations that are concerned with what is known as “advanced motoring”. I belong to an organisation called the [Institute of Advanced Motorists](#) which, like the others, espouses a system of driving, developed by the police and known, perhaps somewhat unimaginatively but accurately, as “The System”.

The interesting thing about the System is that you can apply it to the leadership and management of educational ICT in schools. Before looking at the System in detail, we need to define the terms “advanced driving” and “hazard”.

A definition of advanced driving that I've heard, and which I quite like, is “speed with safety”. I think that is important, because dawdling along at 10 miles an hour in conditions where 30 or 40 or more would be appropriate can be dangerous in itself. On the other hand, driving at 60 around country lanes just because that is the speed limit, when 20 would be much safer, is also not to be recommended.

You will gather from this that the most appropriate speed is always determined by the circumstances prevailing at the time, and those circumstances are changing every second.

As for hazard, that is defined as anything which is potentially dangerous. Now, we tend to think of a “hazard” as something that is **obviously** dangerous, like a spillage of chemicals on the road or a car hurtling towards you on your side of the road. But the key word here is **potentially**. So, a child walking along playing with a ball is a potential hazard, because she may accidentally knock the ball into the road and go running after it. Equally, a row of parked cars is a potential

hazard because someone may walk out from between them, or a door may suddenly fly open.

Interestingly, the most common word used by people who have crashed into someone is “suddenly”. You could say that advanced driving is all about constantly adjusting your field for vision from near to distant, from back to front, and from side to side, in order to help ensure that things do not happen “suddenly” as far as you’re concerned.

The System has been devised as a means of dealing with hazards in a methodical way.

Now, even before getting on to discussing what the System is, you can probably start to draw some analogies between motoring hazards and ICT hazards. There are obvious ones, like the possibility of something going wrong with the equipment. Then there are also potential hazards such as a virus infestation on the network.

But a good way to start to think about hazards is to consider the “good” things that can be hazardous if they are not thought about. Let’s take the case of the child walking along bouncing a ball. What could be more pleasant than to see children playing on a nice summer’s day? But to ensure that nothing terrible happens, you have to take responsibility and try to put yourself in the child’s shoes and, in effect, think **for** them.

So, moving back to educational ICT, what sort of thing would you very much like to happen? One thing that comes to mind immediately is to have a situation in which a substantial number of teachers want to start using the Learning Platform or Virtual Learning Environment. Another is to have a high level of interest from parents wanting to log in to the school intranet or VLE to see how their own children are getting on at school.

Both of those situations are very desirable, but could also be disastrous in terms of reputation, or the stability of the system, or even educational outcomes, if the possible adverse consequences are not thought through in advance.

So, what exactly *is* the System?

It’s a 6 stage approach to hazards, consisting of:

1. Information;
2. Position;
3. Speed;
4. Gear;
5. Acceleration.

Before explaining what each of these means, it needs to be said that the Information phase is actually present throughout all the other stages too. Also, the sequence may need to start again at any time before all stages have been completed.

In driving terms, this is how it would work. Let's suppose you want to turn right at the next set of traffic lights. The first thing you would need to do is check what is going on around you, to your sides, and behind you. Let's put it this way: you would be pretty silly to just pull over to the right-hand lane without even looking. In other words, you will start to gather information from your surroundings, using the means at your disposal, ie your eyes, car windows and mirrors.

The next thing to do, still as part of the information phase, is to let other motorists know what you intend to do. That means, of course, using your indicators to signal that you are pulling over to the right. In other words, you are now **giving** information to others, having already **received** some information yourself.

Next, you need to get yourself into the correct position. Presumably, you want as smooth a ride as possible, so you will try to get into the right-hand lane in good time, as opposed to suddenly cutting across 3 lanes of traffic.

Having got the car into a good position, you now have to adjust its speed in order to achieve your goal smoothly. That may mean braking, or accelerating, depending on the situation.

Having attained the right speed for the circumstances, you need to change up or down in order to be in the right gear for that speed. To a large extent this is done for you in an automatic car, but the principle still holds.

Finally, use the accelerator to keep your speed and keep the car stable while you complete the operation, which in this example is turning right. Then. Once you have successfully turned right, bring your speed up again with the accelerator, if circumstances permit, and then start the process all over again.

The System and the educational ICT leader

Now, I am not going to attempt to stretch the analogy too far, but I think you would agree with me that the educational ICT leader can learn quite a lot from this kind of approach:

1. Start by identifying an objective, such as getting more staff to use the school's Learning Platform.
2. Think about the potential hazards that may arise, such as too little demand, or too much demand.
3. Gather information before actually doing anything. For example, you may discover that not all teachers can actually log into the system because they have not been given a user identity.
4. If that turned out to be the case, you would be better off making sure that is dealt with before announcing some grandiose plan to get everyone using the system. I would regard that action as equivalent to getting yourself in the right position to be able to achieve the objective. It is not in itself achieving the objective, but if you don't do it then achieving the objective is going to be that much harder.

5. Speed is a critical factor in success, and that could mean going faster or going slower. For example, in the summer term there is, in secondary schools, a bit of a reduction in pace between the end of examinations and the end of term. It may be worth speeding up your programme in order to take advantage of that short period. The corollary is that, if you are ready to train people just shortly before the exam season starts, you may be better off slowing down until people are more ready to engage with it.

I won't go any further with this for now. I should imagine that it's possible to regard the gear stage as equivalent to having the right amount of funding in place, but I do think there is a danger of stretching an analogy too far.

Conclusion

I once heard a statistic that is quite remarkable: motorists who take, and pass, the advanced driving test have 80% fewer accidents than "normal" motorists. Even more remarkable is this one: even motorists who have taken and **failed** the advanced driving test have 50% fewer accidents than "normal" motorists. In other words, even learning about and **trying** to apply the System has enormous benefits.

The reason that the System works so well is that it is a logical and methodical approach, not merely to **actual** hazards but **potential** ones as well. It involves anticipation, using information, and constant evaluation and re-evaluation of the prevailing circumstances. Consequently, it involves constantly running "what if?" scenarios in your mind in order to make the fastest possible progress whilst remaining safe.

There is every reason to believe that a similar approach to leading ICT would be equally successful.

Learning from advertising

One of the roles of the educational ICT leader in schools is to promote the subject, to students, and indeed to parents. There is a key lesson we can learn from the advertising professionals in this respect. I am not referring to the poor English, with "sentences" consisting of only two or three words and no verb, and the regarding of grammar as optional. I am referring, rather, to the art of stating the obvious.

The Coca-Cola Corporation did this in [1931](#), with their advertising slogan:

"Every bottle sterilised".

Did anybody really imagine that the bottles were **not** sterilised, or that only every third bottle was sterilised?

There was another one I heard about, although I have been unable to verify it, in which the soft drinks manufacturer's slogan was:

"Our bottles are sterilised with steam".

The fact of the matter was, **all** producers of soft drinks sterilised their bottles with steam.

Now, before you dismiss this as a cheap advertising trick, think about it for a moment in the context of the ICT courses you offer in your school. You don't think twice about the syllabus because you live with it every day. But actually it, or aspects of it, could be a real selling point.

How about:

(For prospective parents) "We're about to introduce the exciting new ICT Programme of Study into our Year 7 timetable!"

(For students aged 14 -19) "Sign up for our new Diploma courses, and learn functional skills in English, Maths and ICT as well."

I'd be interested in hearing your ideas.

Learning from architects

The Commission for Architecture in the Built Environment (CABE) has published a very useful guide entitled "Creating Successful Masterplans: A guide for clients".

What does this have to do with leading or managing ICT? Well, it is actually quite a good summary of what a plan should consist of, and it does not take a great leap of imagination to apply the same principles to educational ICT.

According to CABE, the ingredients of a successful masterplan are as follows. It has to be:

- Visionary;
- Deliverable;
- Fully integrated into the land use planning system. I would reinterpret this as: fully integrated into the school's overall plan;
- Flexible;
- The result of a participatory process;
- Equally applicable to rethinking the role of existing neighbourhoods as creating new ones. I would reinterpret this as: equally applicable to existing buildings and infrastructure as building new ones.

As you would expect, most of the document is about buildings and related issues, but there are some more generally applicable nuggets of good advice. For example, the section entitled "The key components to a masterplan" is well worth reading.

You can download an executive summary and the full document from [here](#).

Learning from bad role models

We all know that it is important to disseminate good practice, by making sure that examples of it are as visible as possible. But there is also something to be said for learning from **poor** practice. When we come across it we need to adopt a

strategy that not only minimises the costs, but maximises the benefits, for our own professional development.

One very good source of information is [Ofsted](#) inspection reports. If you read the periodic reports that are published, about ICT education, you will find out in broad terms what inspectors found to be good, and what they found to be not so good, in both primary and secondary phases.

Although Ofsted is an inspection body for England, colleagues in other countries can still benefit from their findings and expertise. After all, good practice is good practice, and poor practice is poor practice, wherever you happen to be.

In January 2008 I summarised the latest Ofsted findings in two documents available [here](#) to subscribers of Practical ICT.

When looking through the document you have to be brutally honest with yourself, otherwise there is no point in the exercise. Ask yourself¹:

- Do I have enough information to be able to evaluate the ICT provision in my school?
- Is there anything that is highlighted as poor, that my school is guilty of too?
- If so, what can we do about it?
- How can we ensure that positive changes are sustainable?

Here are two “bottom line” questions:

- Would I be worried if an inspector turned up without warning?
- If so, what needs to be done to change that?

Learning from cafés

Cafés are all about customer service. One that I visited a few months ago got it spectacularly wrong. In their quest to squeeze as many people as possible into the space, they seated my wife and me at a small table that did not allow us to try the crossword, and which seemed to be in the waitress’s pathway. Consequently, every time she raced past us it felt like being in a wind tunnel.

Now, I can understand why they would seat us there rather than asking us to come back later, because we would have found somewhere else and **not** come back. The only thing is, our experience was so horrible that we have **never** been back.

Surely a more constructive approach would have been to have offered us some sort of complementary coffee voucher or something. I know that sort of thing can be abused, but we would definitely have come back at some point.

So what can educational ICT leaders learn from this?

¹ I’m assuming that you work in a school, but these questions could be easily adapted to other work situations.

- Experience has shown me that if a (reluctant) user's first experience of using a computer room or other ICT facility is negative, they will not come back.
- It would be better to not accommodate someone's request, if the result cannot be guaranteed to be good, rather than take a chance.
- If you do have to turn someone away, think of an incentive to get them to try again.
- Quality is better than quantity from **everybody's** point of view: it is better to have 5 teachers using ICT really well, thereby creating a buzz, than 50 people using it mundanely or badly.

Over to you

I'd be interested in **your** take on my approach, which is basically to regard ICT provision as a service that needs to be thought about in a commercial way. I don't think educationalists are traditionally very good at taking a commercial perspective. Do you think that is a mistake, or that the commercial perspective is actually inappropriate in the educational context?

[Email](#) me, about this or anything else.

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