



# CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES OF NOTEBOOK COMPUTING

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## Summary

David Nettelbeck conducts workshops in schools across Australia for primary and secondary teachers interested in using computers as a rich teaching, learning and thinking tool.

He teaches English part time at Whitefriars College and was formerly Director of Staff Professional Development and Head of English at St Michael's Grammar School in Melbourne.

Prior to this, David was involved in teacher training in Tanzania as well as being Headmaster of two International Schools there.

He has a particular interest in the implications of new technologies for teaching and learning processes across the curriculum. He believes that all subjects are being transformed by digital literacies with access to vastly increased and up-to-date resources, mixed media and the opportunity to work in a paperless environment. This inevitably brings new challenges for classroom discipline and organisation and a new paradigm for teaching and learning.

Technology is not the solution to poor teaching. There are, however, great new opportunities to move from curriculum-centred to learner-centred, from individual to collaborative tasks and from passive learning to active learning.

This exciting potential makes new demands on personal organisation and planning. Face-to-face relationships are still vital but there is a new challenge to provide a rich range of opportunities that facilitate open-ended learning and thinking processes.

The whole area of classroom management and discipline is still in uncharted waters. Students who don't value learning certainly don't take pride in maintaining their computers and so teachers must devise new ways of control and keeping students on task.

There are also factors beyond a teacher's control with their best-laid plans for the classroom sabotaged by a flaky network or technicians whose system does not support educational goals, or by poorly maintained machines. We do not live in a perfect world and there will always be a need for a 'Plan B' when any kind of technology is involved. New ways of planning as well as new patterns of management are necessary.

## Introduction

Computers are not just another teaching aid, the 'overhead projectors of the new millennium', but can be a whole new way of thinking about teaching and learning. Technology is not the solution to poor teaching. If computers are to be effective learning tools, rather than mere presentation and communication instruments, teachers need to take the opportunity to re-think their approaches to teaching and learning, and move from curriculum-centred to learner-centred approaches, from individual tasks to collaborative work, and from passive learning to active learning.

In doing this, we also take account of the ubiquitous influence of technology in the world of our students who can now more easily say, 'I like to do things my way;... give me the information, skills and tools and let me get on with it;... visuals appeal to me more than text;... I can take responsibility for my own learning process; ... I believe that breadth of experience is as important as depth;... I need to be involved, to do it myself'.

If we are to fulfil the potential of a new learning paradigm, there are 3 key areas to which teachers must give careful attention:

1. personal organisation and planning;
2. classroom management and expectations; and
3. factors outside teacher control.

## Personal Organisation and Planning

I found after several years of teaching in secondary schools with laptops but with traditional classroom management practices, that lessons can be frustrating beyond belief. The network may be down so that online resources cannot be accessed. Log-on time may be affected by network connectivity issues or more commonly by music or games files that are using up laptop memory. Some students will have forgotten or have lost their blue network cords or wireless cards. Others will just want a few minutes to send in their homework for another subject or access e-mail. There could be a plethora of other excuses and the student who has been a reluctant learner will be just as reluctant to maintain a laptop in good working order.

I have also found myself very frustrated at my attempts to get 'the student's heads out of the screen'. Computer mediated communication is one of the good gifts to this generation, but I also believe fervently in face-to-face relationships where facial gestures and body language are vital elements in the communication between teacher and student. The occasional teachable 'aha!' moment in a poetry or literature lesson is rare enough, but even rarer if students are tempted to have their heads 'stuck in a screen'.

In order to minimise these problems in a one-to-one laptop or desktop classroom situation, I designated certain lessons when students were able to bring and use their laptops and other lessons when they were firmly told to leave them in their lockers. In these latter lessons, we went together to the library for fiction reading, listened to poetry, shared the class novel, discussed the current media topics in groups or listened to oral presentations from peers.

In exchange for this *computer ban* in some periods, I set modules of one or two weeks duration which could be done in some designated class time or for home work and in any order. Students could therefore choose whether to read in class and do web researching at home, discuss a creative writing task with a group and

work together on it or work alone on a poetry response. This gave enormous flexibility and choice and a far greater sense of control over their learning for those willing to take the opportunity.

To my surprise, many students were able to reflect with some insight into the enhanced quality of their learning experiences. Of course, others who did not generally do pencil and paper homework, were not enthusiastic about this kind of work either and for some, I had to build in intermediate check points through the week to ensure that they did not sink into a mire of despair on the date when the whole module was due. It was also a great spur to me to ensure that I planned well in advance and a check to see that I had included some elements of poetry, writing, fiction and oral in each module. Face to face teaching actually increased and I was able to give more time to help those who needed it while others were glad to be left alone, immersed in their various self-chosen tasks.

One of the more significant outcomes of this way of working was that I was able to get away from curse of set worksheets, a tempting but often soul-less blind alley. When these kinds of banal prescriptive tasks are set, the good students may race through them and think that they have learnt something while the weaker students use their well-developed avoidance strategies and think they are clever to have beaten the teacher. In neither case, does much critical, scholarly or interpretative thinking go on. I believe that teachers must provide a rich range of opportunities that facilitate open ended learning and thinking processes.

Currently my Year 10 class is embarking on a study of the novel 'Only the Heart' which I teach in a traditional way. I will, however, use open-ended response tasks devised by a group of teachers. These will include:

- draw the Vo family tree using Inspiration software. Show the relationships between the characters and add paragraphs in the *Add Notes* to say what you know about each;
- explore the topic 'Attitudes to War'. Use a concept map to tease out this topic in your own way;
- choose any passage which is a clear description of person or event from the novel. Put it into your Word Document either by typing it in or by scanning it in or by reading it into a sound file. Now annotate the passage with *Call Out* boxes or using the *Add Notes* function or a verbal explanation in a second sound file or respond in some other way;
- interview a Vietnam veteran or a Vietnamese person who was in Vietnam at the time of the war or someone involved in the Vietnam protest movement or someone who has strong opinions about Australia's involvement in the war in Vietnam or someone who has something to say about our treatment of Vietnam veterans or some other person who will elucidate your understanding of the novel. Summarise the interview in a maximum of 6 PowerPoint slides to present orally to the class;
- compile or compose theme music for each of the 3 sections of the novel. Accompany each with a key quote, visual representation and annotation to explain your choices; and
- create a photo story to show the main events in the novel. Use a maximum of 10 pictures and give each a caption or annotated explanation.

The range of choices built-in here was used to extend the talented, directing their choice to the more demanding tasks and at the same time encourage those needing modified work. It also gave an opportunity to students with artistic or literary or musical skill to use it to enhance their English responses and cross the subject barriers.

## **Classroom Management and Expectation**

Factors of classroom management and expectation could be as simple as ensuring that hazardous bags and power cords are tucked carefully under desks. It could mean ergonomically designed chairs with adjustable heights and wheels so that students can roll across the room to the whiteboard, or gather easily in groups for discussion away from the lure of the computer screen. This may not be possible because many of us teach in impossibly small rooms with large classes but also because the wiring of rooms may have been designed by the IT gurus rather than teachers who have to make the spaces work educationally and practically.

There could be significant difficulty in the checking of work submissions from obstinate students. In the past, teachers were able to stand at the door of the classroom and collect written homework or a class task as students left the room and deal with recalcitrants on the spot. If we now ask for work to be sent by e-mail or lodged electronically and later find that it is not there, the student seems to have a stock of excuses like, 'I must have sent it to the wrong address', or 'Do you really know how to open an attachment?' or 'Perhaps the network wasn't up when I lodged it'. New ways of discipline and checking student files and keeping students on task are simply different challenges for teachers these days. Those who deal with overall discipline in a school must also accept responsibility for computer discipline. One Head I know brings together the technician, the student and the parent to view inappropriate material accessed by the student with salutary effect!

Web discussions can be a particularly fraught area of classroom management with secondary students unless the discussion boards are tightly set up and carefully controlled. Anonymity of contribution in a large group may be an opportunity for extroverts to show off and quiet students to retreat so that the learning outcomes can be minimal even if the potential is educationally limitless. Although web discussion can rarely capture the immediacy and fiery interaction of a good classroom debate, it does give the students, especially the quieter and slower thinking and ESL students, an opportunity to have a say and think through their answers before pressing the 'send' button.

## **Factors Beyond Teacher Control**

The third and final area for teacher concern is the need to take into account factors quite beyond the control of the teacher.

Teachers must recognise that their best laid plans in the classroom can be sabotaged by an unreliable network or technicians who may not support what teachers are trying to do, or by poorly maintained machines. We do not live in a perfect world and there will always be a need for 'Plan B' when any kind of technology is involved, but we also need to recognise that good IT technicians are people with special training but also quite unique personality traits.

Generally, teachers have been familiar with teacher aides working near the staff offices and teaching spaces, readily available for communication with teachers, aware of the academic program and with clear lines of responsibility to the Heads of Faculty who can direct and evaluate their work. By contrast, IT technicians often work, by necessity, in an inaccessible area behind security doors and windows, adding to the myth and mystique that surrounds them. It can be a pleasant surprise to meet technical staff who understand the details of curriculum and the kind of support teachers need. It may also be that teachers with relatively little computer competence themselves do not know how to make the best use of the skills of their technical colleagues.

One of the major problems also may be that very few system managers are accountable to anyone, from the Principal down, who is able to give them support and assess the technical competence of their work. Even school bursars, whose work is a mystery to most teachers, generally have a financial wizard on the school council who keeps a supportive eye on their work and they are also subject to an independent external review each year by the school's auditors. Rarely are such accountability or support mechanisms available to IT managers, yet they may spend millions of dollars over several years on the network, systems and associated hardware.

I see no simple or quick solution to this problem which is common in many Australian schools. If, however, the vision of the school includes an unambiguous statement on the value of ICT as an essential learning and thinking tool for this generation of students, then the mission statement of the school must also include achievable objectives or strategies for the fulfilment of the vision. This can only happen if specific goals are agreed on together by the IT and the academic staff rather than the two groups holding each other at arms length. Specific strategies must be agreed to between the groups as they acknowledge the need to work together as a team in achieving shared goals. This may require some skilful leadership and mediation by the Principal or Curriculum Coordinator.

Among the many schools that I have visited and among the many teachers and technical staff, I have talked to, one school stands out. In this low-fee but 'compulsory laptop' school, the System Manager and the Director of E-Learning sit together in the same office, work through budgeting, networking, staff training and curriculum implementation goals together and both are equally and jointly responsible for the implementation of these to the Deputy Headmaster who is must put into practice the vision statement of the school.

The network at this school is rarely 'down', students have a very quick turnaround on laptop maintenance with minimal in-house technical staff. The Director of E-Learning is not IT trained or a 'tech wiz' but has a strong belief that 'being connected' can enrich the learning experiences of her students and by example gives the teachers a clear understanding of what the school's IT policy is, why students are required to buy laptops and how they are to implement this policy in their classrooms.

It seems to me to be a very workable pattern on which to build school administrative structures and sound classroom management practices which will make the best use of the great potential of ICT to enhance teaching and learning.