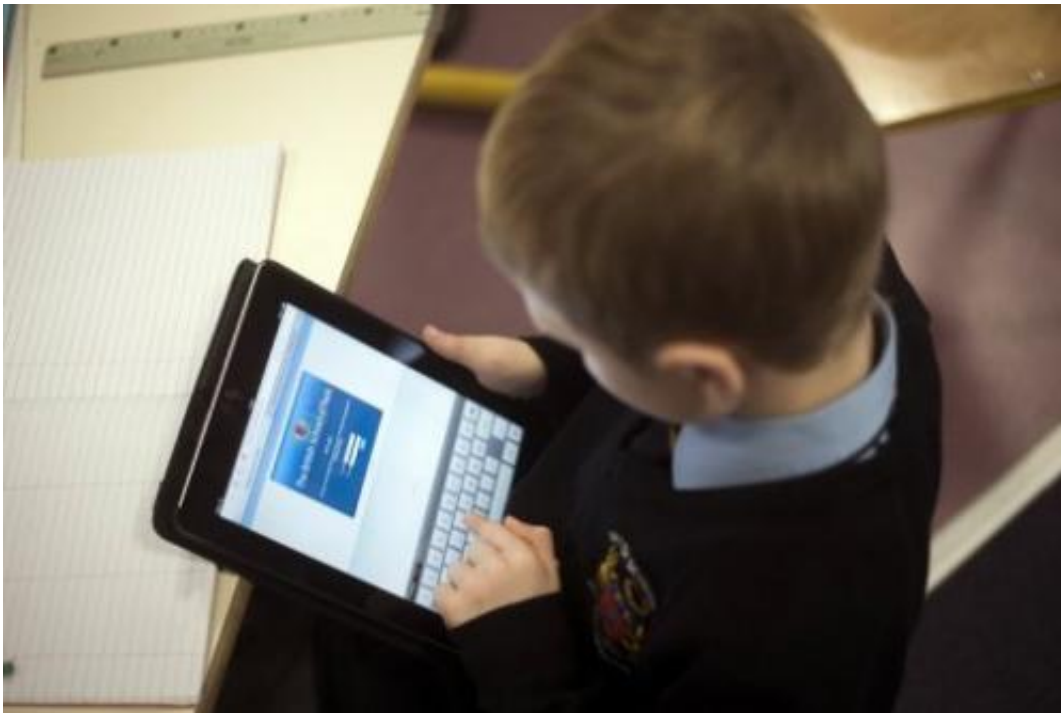


Tablet technology takes teaching into 21st century

December 7 2012, by Rachel K Rogers



A student is seen using an iPad digital tablet at the British School of Paris, in Croissy-sur-Seine. Instead of textbooks, the pupils at the school are now pouring over tablet computers linked in to a wireless broadband network.

Emma McCluskey's classroom looks much like any other.

A verb chart, posters and [pupils'](#) work adorn the walls. The children lean over their desks, seven and eight-year-old brows furrowed in concentration.

In its essence, it is a scene that could have been recorded at any time since Shakespeare was at school.

Except it isn't. Instead of textbooks, the pupils are pouring over [tablet computers](#) linked in to a [wireless broadband network](#).

There are still pencils in their hands but for how much longer?

In an age when toddlers learn to use touchscreens before they can speak, tablet technology is about to take teaching into a brave new world, and McCluskey's students have been invited to the preview.

In September, the British School of Paris (BSP), where McCluskey teaches, became one of a handful of schools across Europe to take the plunge and decide to restructure their teaching around the technology that is already integral to its students' lives.

Every pupil at the international school on the outskirts of Paris, from four-year-olds to university-bound 18-year-olds and every member of staff, was issued with an [iPad](#) at the start of the autumn term.

Not everyone was convinced. Parents fretted that their children would be on Facebook as soon as their teachers' backs were turned, or that an iPad in the bag would make them a [target](#) for mugging.

Three months on, everyone involved is still adapting and the experiment has not been without hiccups. Surfing on the move during break times, for example, had to be banned after a few children took a tumble.

But overall, the verdict is positive from both pupils and staff like McCluskey, who lights up when she talks about an upcoming project on maps.

"Normally it's quite a drabby kind of topic but it's brilliant now," she says. "We're going to be taking birds eye view photographs with the iPad and then were doing a (virtual) tour of the school."

Like most European schools, the BSP was already linked into a virtual learning environment, with resources increasingly drawn from the Internet and classrooms equipped with interactive whiteboards. But a traditional computer room arrangement meant even a well-resourced school like BSP could only get its pupils online for as little as two hours per week.



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In that context, giving each pupil the means to access the available

resources at their own pace, was a no-brainer for Steffen Sommer, the headmaster of the school.

"Unlike us adults, today's children are natives of this technology," he says. "They have an urge to communicate, they have an urge to research.

"It is very different from what education used to be like, It's wrong to ask the children to learn in a 20th-century style when they're clearly living in a different world."

The tablets did not come cheap. Wear-and-tear and the pace of technological innovation mean they will last only two or three years.

The school has also had to shell out 200,000 euros (\$256,000) to upgrade their wireless network, which uses a "smooth wall," to keep students off inappropriate websites.

But savings on ink and paper, which alone was costing the school 100,000 euros (\$128,000) per year, and the lower price of e-textbooks, means the new technology should pay for itself in the medium term, as well as being more environmentally friendly.

In McCluskey's classroom, students follow along on their tablets as she guides them to online math worksheets tailored to their individual abilities.

Her students come from all over the world, some initially speak little English, and a few have learning difficulties. Across that spectrum, she reports improved motivation.

"When they have to do something on the iPad they really can't wait to get started - if it's in their book it takes them about 10 minutes sometimes just to get the date written," she said.

The time saved by the devices is a recurring theme. Older students play games on them and access social media (outside class, of course) but they are also used to snap photos or record audio of their homework assignments, gaining precious minutes in the end-of-lesson rush.

In the evenings they can ask each other questions or work with other students on group projects using video chat.

"Quite a few people lost their homework last year because we had so many papers and things that we had to give in," reports 12-year-old Mia Lawson.

"It's quite fun because you get to make different things on it and there are loads of different apps that you can get."

BSP's initial plan was to ask parents to ensure each student brought their own tablet-style device but it was decided that operating on different platforms would be too complicated.

Apple's iPad was chosen partly because its extended battery life suits the school day and, for the moment, gives it an edge over rivals, but also because of resources available through from the world's most valuable company.

With programs for creating interactive resources, a huge number of textbooks available for download, and more than 20,000 educational apps, Apple has spent years positioning itself in anticipation of an explosion of sales of mobile internet devices in the education sector, according to tech website Wired.com's Tim Carmody.

"It's not just about engaging students. It's about engaging everyone in the education and publishing industries," Carmody wrote.

At the release for their textbook apps in January, Apple's Phil Schiller said that 1.5 million iPads were currently being used in education. The new mini-iPad, launched last month, has been designed specifically with the education market in mind.

BSP headmaster Sommer says its up to each teacher to decide how much use they make of the device at their disposal. What matters is creating active learners.

"The notion of problem solving is a most fundamental 21st century skill, much more so than detailed knowledge which might be obsolete tomorrow," he says.

"They're given a task and with the technology they are working out by themselves how they can solve that task."

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