

Teachers have been let down by a decade of inaction on digital technologie

July 24 2020, by Keith Turvey and Norbert Pachler



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The coronavirus pandemic has led to significant disruption to school education in England. Teachers have made a concerted effort to use digital technology and [remote teaching and learning](#) to lessen the impact of this disruption on their students.

However, thanks to a decade of unambitious government policy, many have faced an uphill struggle. A general lack of preparedness for [digital technology](#) in England has left many children without the tools they need to access and benefit from remote learning.

Our [recent research](#) shows that teachers have been hampered by weak policies surrounding technology supported learning, and by the research behind these policies. To unlock the educational potential of digital technologies in the future, teachers need support which focuses on innovation and practice.

A decade stood still

The importance of using digital technology in teaching, and some of its associated challenges, were established well [over a decade ago](#).

However, the coalition government of 2010 brought in policies that increasingly neglected the role of digital technologies in education. It began with the closure of the [British Educational and Communications Technology Agency](#) in 2011.

This organisation faced some [justified criticism](#), including for its tendency towards uncritical adoption of educational technology. But it did play an important role, supporting schools in their attempts to acquire and integrate digital technologies in the classroom.

In 2013, the National Curriculum for England was [reviewed](#). Changes included the end of the expectation, [established in 1999](#), that the critical use of digital technologies in education was an important key skill, and that it should be supported both through the subject of information and communications technology (ICT) and in pupils' [use of ICT across the curriculum](#).

Past standards required trainee teachers to develop their knowledge and skills in ICT in their teaching practice and [wider professional work](#). However, all reference to the use of digital technologies for teaching and learning were removed from the 2010 [Teacher Standards](#) which trainees need to demonstrate to gain Qualified Teacher Status in England.

These policies, as well as an era of [real-term cuts in education funding](#), have left many schools' access to digital technologies weakened. It is not surprising that many, though not all, have found the move to remote and digitally-supported learning during the coronavirus pandemic challenging.

Unlocking future potential

Research on the use of ICT in schools has an important role to play, involving teachers in identifying what works and what doesn't. But the research used to inform government policy on ICT over the last decade has failed in this regard.

The [Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\)](#), funded by the Department for Education, has produced research which only adds very high level, comparatively common sense insights, such as that the use of [technology should not be an end in itself](#).

[Back in 2004](#) we already knew that effective teachers make their own critical judgements about how to use digital technologies. They do this by blending their knowledge about their subject, their knowledge of how learners understand it, and how the features of digital technologies relate to such knowledge. But a lack of support for teachers to hone these practices means that this knowledge is not passed on or developed.

The education sector has to constantly re-learn lessons about the unique challenges of integrating technologies into education. Different levels of

access, as well as different attitudes towards or ways of using digital technology, can have an impact on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. But many [trainee teachers](#) are left to develop this understanding by chance.

The [Core Content Framework](#) for Initial Teacher Training in England, which sets out the minimum entitlement for those in initial [teacher](#) education, perpetuates this shortcoming. It makes no reference to technology-supported learning.

In [our research](#), we introduced the idea of "pedagogical provenance". This means valuing teachers' stories of how methods of teaching using digital technologies came to be used—like understanding the history of an object or artefact. This could include how [video conferencing](#) has been used to explore art exhibitions, or how text messaging among pupils can improve literacy and spelling.

Knowing the purpose and the context of how a particular teaching method or digital tool was introduced helps guide teachers' future decisions about how to adapt them to their own classroom. But this kind of detail is so often absent.

For instance, a review of research on the use of [tablet devices](#) in [education](#) found that there was a lack of detailed explanations provided to teachers "as to how, or why, using tablets within certain activities can improve learning".

Teachers need to be supported by policy and research to help them develop expert knowledge on the use of digital technologies. Failure to do so may simply mean re-learning the same lessons over and over again. To help teachers prepare for the unknown challenges ahead we must build on the lessons of the past.

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Provided by The Conversation

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