

Are tablets the future for education?

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We represent the first cohort of people whose modus vivendi has been jolted by the quantum leap in digital technology. The advent and popularisation of the worldwide web and related technologies have disrupted the ways we used to go about our things.

Discussions fuelled by the ever-changing landscape of digital technology touch on various institutional and structural facets of our society, not the least the scope for embracing these technologies in educational and learning contexts.

Many researchers in the field of technology and education claim that a lot of learning is taking place outside formal educational settings in what I prefer to define as digitally mediated settings. Undeniably, this comes with a healthy component of merits. Due to the unique qualities of digitally-facilitated environments, users are improving qualities such as independent thinking, enhancement of responsibility for their own production, collaborative and social skills, and communication that for various reasons may not be fully developed in classroom environments.

The onset of cheaper and readily available mobile devices has boosted this trend to the point that traits mentioned are being practised on the go with no indications where they can lead. The focus should now be on how to maximise the qualities of mobile technologies to support learning.

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The critical characteristics that best describe a mobile device underline a shift from 'just-in-case', to 'just-in-time' to a more personalised experience in 'just-for-you' learning and to

include portability, synchronisation and connectivity, instant-on, reliability, simplicity and power to last long.

While these characteristics can be attributed to various handheld devices such as mobile phones, smartphones, MP3 players and laptops, for educational purposes, none seem to harbour more promise than tablets. With the portability of a paperback and the power of a PC, tablets seem to instigate hope and offer potential where PCs failed. Very short boot time, enhanced mobility, interactive screens and small size were missing in PCs but they make tablets a viable premise for independent and personalised learning, enhanced engagement, flexibility, communication and collaboration.

There is also enough data to show that where tablets have been introduced, there was enhancement in learning subject matter and in the augmentation of personal traits. This includes improvement in language and literacy skills, development in personal skills like enhanced engagement and improved information literacy.

On similar terms, the use of tablets as personal devices with primary school pupils in Scotland motivated qualities of ownership and independent learning. A survey with 6,000 students in primary and secondary schools in Quebec, Canada, suggests a boost in creativity, collaboration and motivation.

However, since tablets were not yet fully integrated into teaching and learning programmes, setbacks also emerged. These included the unavailability of digital textbooks and the lack of teachers' time for adoption and adaptation of tablets in formal learning situations.

It is not enough for authorities and policymakers to express their wishful thinking about a technology. We have been down that road before and we know what happens when technology-driven policies are rolled out that ignore or give second preference to users' feedback.

The inclusion of tablets in educational contexts is a very delicate and daring initiative. Besides the enormous financial costs underlying this enterprise, there is also the daunting issue of the repercussions that will invariably echo into the future of our educational system, the children themselves and, therefore, the directions our economy will take.

It goes without saying that schools epitomise formal learning and while they are not immune to change, they also respond to it slowly. When faced with innovative technologies, education does not have a very good track record.

I, for once, take this as a blessing. I am pleased to see an administration that is wise and patient enough to ignore the pressures placed by the time frames of a political manifesto with the promise of the inclusion of tablet technologies in schools.

Instead I see a managing body that is prioritising teachers' and students' feedback through a well-implemented and extensive pilot project with the Ministry for Education being bold enough to state that "only the outcome of the pilot project will determine exactly when best and how best to do the national implementation".

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