

If a child uses an EdTech platform, did any learning actually happen?

EdTech companies: please give classroom teachers the needed facilities to fully integrate your products into their everyday teaching routines.

Give schools what they need, and your product might just leap over into the mainstream.

In all the bright-sky, digital futures thinking that goes alongside EdTech, there remains a key reality-check issue that prevents EdTech being embraced by the majority of teaching staff.

The elephant in the room is OFSTED – the organisation that schools are so often beholden to – and their requirement to look thoroughly at the ‘evidence’ of learning. It would seem, unfortunately, that in the rush to embrace the shiny and efficient digital realm, EdTech often falls down when it comes to the raw practicalities that teachers face when working towards their inspection requirements.

As one headteacher pointed out to staff at her school, “the children’s books are a glimpse into your shop window.” That’s not why many of us became teachers, but it remains undoubtedly true – and with OFSTED’s current focus on curriculum plans, alongside the ‘evidence’ of such teaching sequences, such traditionalist thinking seems to have become more important, not less, in recent times.

A key problem is that EdTech tools rarely, if ever, have facilities to directly help teachers with their overwhelming need to get their children’s books – as they progress throughout a typical school year – filled with impressive and meaningful evidence. These tomes of ‘work’, that are often viewed as showing unquestionable evidence of the learning that has taken place, remain in a painfully workload-heavy, halfway-zone between digital and print.

There is so much opportunity here for EdTech companies, and yet they remain blissfully out of touch with OFSTED’s huge traditionalist influence on most state primaries. Don’t fight it, but think around the area; meet schools halfway, and you might just find a way in.

It is not just OFSTED who often work within this traditionalist model, many teachers themselves place neatness, presentation and traditional school routines in extremely high regard – and this preference becomes reinforced by inspection criteria. There are also some base truths that co-exist with such attitudes: when it comes to the surroundings of a school, we can all agree that we would rather not have sterile and blank walls for our youngest learners. Nobody is suggesting that colour, brightness and tight presentation aren’t great assets to have within school environments.

Yet whether it’s ‘work scrutiny’ or a ‘book look,’ the judgement on teaching is clear as day – if those books look full; look neat and tidy; if they reflect a steady progression of learning; teachers are halfway towards winning through on those tricky inspection matters.

Come off the side-lines and become part of the main event

For a many schools then, EdTech products tend to sit on the sidelines of classroom-based learning. They take up the homework position, or that 'useful as an extra' – but not strictly necessary – role quite easily, while the main thrust of classroom learning happens elsewhere. What's really sad is that many teachers have an understanding that EdTech can grant children a great way into self-managed, focussed, and fluent learning, yet are scared to fully embrace it for the simple reason that it's hard to "get anything in the books."

Let's take maths EdTech in the primary sector as a key example. Many teachers recognise how maths fluency can be tapped into with EdTech tools – and there is a great deal more that can be achieved through analytics and the potential to differentiate questions for different groups of children. It's not direct teaching – that part seems best left to the humans – but EdTech maths at primary gives fantastic opportunities to set questions automatically; to deliver a sheer volume of questions to help achieve fluency and revise topics; to identify gaps in children's understanding that can be followed up with targeted teaching.

Children may well have been set work through an EdTech system that they are busily and happily engaged in, with personalised nudges from the software and great analytics feeding back to the teacher. But what a teacher needs – and would be incredibly pleased to see – are facilities to create PDFs full of printable one-pagers (one for each and every child in a class) that can either be stored in a folder or – as might be necessary – guillotined and stuck into the child's workbook.

Yes there would need to be options and choices, but the ability to click just one or two buttons to ease this purpose would be utterly transformational. Please don't say "well you can just take screenshots and crop this and that question and..."

Frankly, no. One of the reasons for a teacher to use EdTech is to streamline processes and save time. The need for meaningful, printable interaction with daily classroom teaching should be front and centre of many EdTech company's development plans. If well-considered, such systems could provide a fantastic feedback loop and consolidation routine for children.

In practical terms, a page for each child would need to show their name and a date – there would also need to be some form of written objective (or objectives) that state the area(s) of learning completed by the child. The page *could* give some detail of how many questions were completed by the child online; it could show how many questions the child got correct or not; perhaps some written guidance on what the child needs to do next, or a facet of learning they haven't got right. The page *could* also have a couple of questions for the child to try again, perhaps as consolidation of the learning that had taken place in the session before, perhaps to move them onwards.

As you can imagine, there are many ways this might be approached, and a well-designed system would allow a teacher to set defaults and get their printable PDFs with a couple of clicks each time. While providing a valuable record of the learning that took place, it would also feed into the handwritten approach that is still an important part of a child's progress and assessment processes that will come later.

Indeed with maths, to be able to handwrite directly onto some individualised questions, feeds directly into the importance of 'showing workings' in maths, and provides a direct link between on-screen learning and that all-important child's workbook evidence trail.

It's all out there for the taking, and I have no doubt those EdTech companies that embrace such opportunities will see a huge uptick of interest from schools. There are plenty of products out there that do the digital side of learning really well, but their popularity will turn supersonic if they can fit into the more traditionalist evidence-trails that schools need to be part of.

It would be quite easy to push back against the points I've made here, and claim it's a temporary blip of England's OFSTED regime. But when will schools become *less* accountable?; when are inspectors not going to want to see the 'evidence' of what has happened over the previous weeks of learning? In the absence of a revolution, the smartest EdTech companies need to provide the tools that will make their mark and show the true value they can bring to both teachers and children.

One caveat: it isn't always just about print – digital books and online journals provide a glimpse at how learning processes can be recorded, often vibrantly and easily, in digital form. Recording the processes and outcomes of a class DT project, for example, can be wonderfully realised – and proudly shown off – in a digital format. Yet there is always an open mechanism for viewing such mediums – they are published to the web, or in PDFs, in ways that can be viewed and reflected upon, on screen, easily. And it often will only work easily for certain subjects and certain aspects of subjects - English and Maths require *all* the detail for *all* of the children, and each child's book remains key to that.

So it's a careful line that needs to be drawn, and the exact requirements from EdTech systems will depend upon subjects that are being catered for. Wide-eyed tech idealists may look on with deaf ears, but schools have to deal with a system that puts human accountability front and centre – the traditionalist movement has a lot in its favour when presenting that great wealth of learning 'evidence' that can be so convincing and necessary.

Very happy to discuss any of the points made here further in the context of your product.

Do drop us a line.

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