



Digital muggles or digital muddles?

Thoughts on the need for a shared vocabulary to stop the train of digital confusion in education and pupils' learning.

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All educators understand the importance of introducing new terminology when presenting new material to their students. 'Key words' or 'new vocabulary' boxes can be seen in countless lesson plan templates, highlighting the value of encouraging learners to engage with appropriate language when exploring different topics or themes.

The 'shared vocabulary' is explicitly referenced in order to help teachers and learners communicate around new concepts and should ideally lead to better understanding all round. While the practice of using a 'shared vocabulary' in this way may be adopted at individual teacher level, or even school level, the same cannot be said about the wider education system. This is especially evident when it comes to 'new' educational disciplines or developing areas, especially those associated with digital technologies and educational innovation.

It is impossible to deny the influence of technology on our everyday lives and its impact on the way we learn now and in the future, and there has been a staggering growth in the amount of global and local attention paid to digital technology in education across all sectors. In 2018, more young people have access to a range of 'learning technologies' to support their education. The use of technology ('Using ICT') is embedded in the statutory NI curriculum as a cross-curricular skill. There is an increasing range of KS5 and post-16 subjects and alternative pathways to further education and employment promoting the use of specific 'technology-related skills'. More schools are promoting the use of technology to enhance management systems. Others are talking about the need for developing students' or teachers' technical skills, such as using specific digital applications or being able to code. Others are talking about critical perspectives surrounding the power of digital technologies to inspire new pedagogical approaches and curriculum re-design more broadly; others are talking about traditional skills like creativity and critical thinking and how they could be developed through networked, digitally-rich environments.

Buzzwords and phrases like 'digital innovation', 'digital excellence', 'digital agility', 'digitalisation', and digitalisation (my favourite, used frequently by OECD) sound impressive and complex, but have far more to do with people, their mind-sets and openness to change than the 'digital' aspects themselves. The ambiguity of all these terms and the potential for misinterpretation is a concern, but educators are also in danger of becoming exploited by

opportunists who see a gap to fill, where they can easily prey on the prevailing ignorance that surrounds all of this. Perhaps that is why private consultants and commercial entities are influencing educational decision-making like never before. A recent example of this includes the buzz surrounding the commodification of the much over-hyped and over-promoted 'design thinking' fad, lauded as a revolutionary process for problem-solving, when it is, in fact, just thinking.

What is also even more concerning is that senior figures and members of the educational elite also use these terms, without providing definitions for the purposes of clarity or mutual understanding. These terms then go on to appear in policy documents and reports, perpetuating the messy and muddled landscape that has been created through the use of vague and woolly language.

So many of the challenges associated with digital technology and innovation in education are due to a lack of high-level strategy and a clear vision of how to support senior leaders, teachers, parents and learners so that everyone can benefit from a coordinated approach. However, the absence of a collective grasp of the language is contributing to a lingering, ominous confusion that could easily be addressed by starting with a good review of some key words and phrases and the adoption of a carefully considered 'shared vocabulary' across the system.

WeLearn would like to note that this article was submitted well before the current crisis that has precipitated a much wider use of educational (and other) technology to accommodate a new era of learning for children. What do teachers need most right now, in order to help them, their pupils and their pupils' parents/guardians through the uncertainty ahead?

What are the words and phrases that need to be banished into Room 101 and how can we use what is already available to create a more coherent and cohesive experience for everyone?

What are the main sources of stress or each of the affected groups and how can we address them?

No-one has the whole answer, but if we work together we can create a shared experience that works for everyone.

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