Why give teachers mobile computers?

Christina Preston

The £4.5 million grant from the DFEE for mobile computers for teachers marks an important shift in government thinking. Disputes over the organisation of distribution should not prevent the teaching profession from applauding this significant gesture. Teachers have been expected to share computers with their students for too long. Some local authorities even insist that the pupils should always come first. This represents a serious misunderstanding of the teachers' professional need.

Mobile computers as professional tools are the subject of a study by Project Miranda based at the Institute of Education, London University. Over one hundred teachers have competed for on-line courses linked to the use of Toshiba 486 mobile computers with modems. The winning scholars are encouraged to develop and share good practice in teaching and learning through training workshops , on-line support and peer conferencing for which they received a London Institute of Education Certificate.

Applications for the Toshiba scholarship package provide strong evidence from the teaching profession of the broad appeal of computer mobility and on-line connections for community links, industrial partnership, mentoring, global communication and lifelong learning.

The Toshiba Internauts record changes in their attitude to computers and their working style over a year. Ben Franklin, Plume School Essex found that ownership of the best technology was crucial to teachers' self esteem...and the respect of his students. 'Mobility is high profile. Other teachers and students soon become curious to see what you are doing.'

David Litchfield, from Norton School on Stockton on Tees observed that 'access to the Internet shrinks the world- a unique window on global information that teachers and learners can explore together critically. Forums for specialist interests and information, access to vast databases, access to up to date information give the opportunity to download what is useful and relevant. Liaison with other students and teachers nationally and internationally is a bonus that develops broader perspectives. At Norton we are empowered as global citizens.'

Tolworth Girls found a solution to supporting student teachers who could communicate with mentors while on teaching practice. Student teachers were enthusiastic about the opportunity to ask questions on the run, whether tutors were in the school or back at the university. 'Our school would like to develop this system for the fifteen students who come to us each year.'

'It's an office in a box !' agreed the scholars. 'You can work where it is most convenient and comfortable – from meetings and from home. The ability to move between fax and electronic communication is flexible. You can respond quickly and act on impulse.' John Potter from Harbinger School in the London Docklands said, 'Mobile PCs ease access

problems to desktops that are heavily used, takes into the home professional software. Mobility supports the efficient and attractive completion of administrative tasks and worksheets.'

Some scholars encouraged everyone on the staff to be an expert in some aspect of their mobile PC. The intensive use generated through ownership helped relax teachers who learnt through play, mirroring the approach of children. Providing the notebook to senior managers at Norton, for example, helped them to identify more quickly and accurately their training needs.

Teachers were also able to adapt their learning to suit their life style. David remarked that 'New ways and places of working soon develop. There is less pressure to start and finish in one go. You can catch up in classrooms with phone lines, at home in the living room, at friends' and relatives' houses .' Ben Franklin added, 'The computer gave me mobility in school between classrooms, at meetings, out of school INSET, on holiday, at home and on field trips- and our climbers took a Tosh to the Himalayas to send back their news – it is addictive!

Opportunities for on-going reflection on new styles of teaching and learning are increased by continual access to recording tools. 'I've moved straight from writing notes about students to writing a reflective diary. ' said David whose school also changed from writing minutes to shorter action plans because the mobile was available.

Portable computer costs are less than was expected. Advice to governors and the heads thinking of purchasing mobile computers includes:

    buy the most RAM and ROM you can afford
    buy machines that can be expanded with cards
    buy reliable standard kit rather than going for cheapness
    have a budget for software and training as well as hardware
    build in local telephone access and budgets for telephone bills
    take broad advice on a gateway subscriptions
    choose off line readers for on-line access
    consider battery productivity and management
    supply good printer access
    organise helplines
    train some friendly local support – parents or students

The Toshiba scholarships have already proved that long term on-going professional development is possible for more teachers. The distribution of mobile computers with on-line facilities makes training tutorials and reflective conferencing with colleagues an ordinary part of the teacher's working life, rather than an isolated experience. The on-line system is useful as an updating forum for teacher interaction, assistance and support for student teachers and NQTs. Links between schools and with business can be maintained informally.

In 1996 the Toshiba Scholarship programme has expanded. Funders include Acorn, Adobe, British Council, BT, Guildford College, Microsoft, National Council for Educational Research, Open University, SIR, South Bank University and TAG. Nene College is conducting the evaluation.

One of the 1996 scholars, Gordon James, from a quiet Suffolk village, Wickham Market, enjoys a state of the art classroom resourced by BT's Martlesham Research and Development Laboratories. After two years to reflect, Gordon suggests that these tools do not dictate what the children will be taught, but increasingly determine how. 'Like it or not, these tools will increasingly affect every aspect of life – almost a case of change or drown.'

The mobile computer challenge offers teachers the opportunity to take control of technology; to be critical and competent learners; to have access to limitless knowledge and to global neighbours; to be authors as well as readers; makers as well as consumers. When the teachers really understand the potential through opportunities to experiment themselves they will be only too glad to pass on the advantages to their students.