8   Discussion: Voices Project reviewed

This book arose out of work on the Voices Project. We conclude by giving members of that project a say on the six questions raised at the start of the book with the aim of stimulating further debate in the community. The speakers are Vicky Cartwright (VC); Michael Hammond (MH); Sarah Younie (SY); John Woollard (JW). Each speaker is offering a personal not 'an ITTE view' on the issues raised.

Can we identify what has been gained and lost, particularly in the development of software, during their careers?

MH: Yes, reading this section again I want to reinforce that it is not about the resurrection of small programmes, but someone do that for *Suburban Fox* please, but it is that close working with teachers that has been lost and needs to be recreated. I guess I am also a bit nostalgic for school's hardware and software though I know that will not come back. I get upset when I see schools using *Access*, because it was bundled with *Office*, when they would be much better off using things like *Pinpoint* or other databases designed for curriculum use.

JW: OK, I agree with that but there is another view. I remember, a couple of years ago at an ITTE Research Conference, a whole group of people saying 'we, as teachers, should identify what we want to do, what we want to teach, what we want the pupils to learn, and then design the technology to do it'. I wanted to say 'we should get the technology and then see how it can be imaginatively used'. As one colleague put it in the book the affordances don't really emerge until someone tries to use them. By all means get that close working relationship but it is not just providing what teachers want, but also providing what they don't know they want until they see it or have tried it.

MH: Within this way of seeing things, do you think that Logo is something lost?

JW: Well, we have that view represented in the book; one colleague in particular is really interested in *Logo*. He wants us to go back to the idea of understanding the technology, not just being a user of technology. I like the parallel with *Second Life*, for example, he says, more or less, that you can have this fantastic time playing games in *Second Life* but it's how you manipulate and build and change the worlds which is important. So *Logo* left a tradition which is still there, it is not so much talked about today, and to be truthful does not really get a space in ICT as a subject which I think really is a problem. I don't think this is about us becoming 'techies' it about the importance of the imaginative use of technology and doing things with it that go well beyond the designers had envisioned.

Why is the introduction of computers so problematic?

MH: I think we know all the usual arguments and they are covered in the book, but the one thing I would like to add is the importance of routines. Teachers stick with the known way of doing things but we need to understand why routines are helpful in our work and in our daily lives. We need routines, to do some things automatically, so we have time and space to think about the things that really matter. To change requires that extra dollop of energy, planning or whatever, and we might just not have it.

JW: Yes that is understood, but there is a wider point in that the technology offers the potential for all sorts of things and that has always been the case. The vision for the use of this technology is limited by our understanding of what technology 'can do' and moulded by what we think education 'should do'. Those 'should dos' seem to stay pretty constant yet the technology 'can dos' move forward in leaps and bounds. There is your problem.

SY: I think what comes over is that computers were seen as this opportunity to do something new and different; to change pedagogy. But when you look at the way they talk about these colleagues talk about their careers there was an embracing of risk; these folks were the risk takers, with the spirit of pioneers, embracing new frontiers, with an awareness of tensions, contradictions and certain romanticism. They found an opportunity to, if I could put it, fracture what has gone before: technology can provide a space for us to open up our preferred practices and engage with new ways of doing things. Now that is great place to be but also a scary one and I think what they are wrestling with is to give that vision widespread appeal so they don't end up high and dry as the hero innovator, the disappointed enthusiast. There is a real and necessary tension between being utterly respectful of teachers and the work they do and disgruntled at the way schooling takes place, and that came out I think.

How do beliefs about teaching affect the use of technology?

MH: I found the chapter on beliefs a very difficult one to write as it is absolutely clear that in some way people's ideas of teaching and learning link up with their view of technology. There is no doubt about this, but it is very, very difficult to unpick. The problem is that we are not really talking about technology as a thing in itself but what we see in it. To be provocative, I wonder if computers are not so much a tool for creativity, as suggested in the book, but instead are tools which will be used creatively by creative people. If you like, what comes first the technology or the pedagogy, is it chicken or egg?

SY: Yes, I think some of that comes over and what stood out in the interviews, we could not include all this in the book, were the metaphors when talking about technology. The images recalled the first writing on cyberspace: weaving the web, understanding the warp, weft, threads, linkages, crisscrossing, interconnectivity and multiplicities – of blending and nonlinear networks. So yes, the participants carry a sense of technology, not as bits of wire, cards, processing chips or whatever, but of actions, of connections of drawing people together. We

should have asked them what do you think a computer is – we would have got some interesting replies.

JW One of the areas emerging in some of the responses is the value associated with computing. The ITTE community is a diverse collection of those who can do powerful things with the technology, others that can make the technology do powerful things and some that feel that teaching pupils how to make the technology do those thing is important. To them, and I am one of them, the value of all pupils at all ages, at the appropriate level, understanding things like algorithm, data structure, logic, binary, instructions and procedures is as necessary as being able to understand grammar rules or manipulate number. Some of the participants show regret in the decline of computing and I agree with that and it really does open up a point of divergence with the community.

How has policy helped develop and helped constrain the use of computers in school?

MH: I think there is a real critique of policy here – and incidentally I think health professionals, social workers and so on would have very similar stories. But I want to hold back a bit and say we don't know how it looks from the point of view of politicians. If you are thinking about Labour, they remember the days when schools were pilloried in the papers all the time, public services under attack, open season on teachers, unelectability of their party. You cannot underestimate that legacy, and I am sure they will argue all this central control in their eyes, not matter how fanciful this sounds to you and me, is about saving the idea of public service, not undermining it. Then you need to recognise that is what is politicians do – they simplify a lot of complex arguments in a story which is easily understood. That is a pain, but that is the way it is. They reduce it to headlines: 'The Government has resolved to put a computer into every school', 'Government to train all teachers in ICT'; 'All schools to have a VLE'. It sounds modern, it seems compelling story, it sounds like progress, but in a way it is nonsense. We have a different story but where is it? We need to market ourselves better or, if we can't do that, just say we cannot engage in this kind of thing!

VC: I want to come in here from my experiences as someone teaching in a primary school because I've been able to interpret what participants have said to me in the light of my own experiences. Something which really began to come across as I interviewed people was a feeling that a 'golden age' had somehow been lost - a time when teachers were more free to experiment without the constraints of a prescribed curriculum or heavy accountability. I don't know if that is true but it is backed up by many of my teacher friends. They had not necessarily had much to do with ICT but those who taught in schools, pre-National Curriculum, view things in the same light.

As someone who began teaching 'post National Curriculum' I feel envious when I hear colleagues and friends talk about the way things were. Part of me feels as if I got the short straw and entered the profession at the wrong time! A friend of mine who's been teaching for

nearly forty years, who feels like this, often talks of the pivotal role the local authorities had at this time and really laments their loss of power. I had never really understood what she meant until my analysis of the interviews for this project began to merge with my own experiences. For instance, during interview analysis, a really strong concept of the role of the LEA as an important intermediary began to emerge. There seemed to exist a time when LEA's excelled at the job of both 'interpreter' and 'supporter', in that they could somehow bridge the gap between what government wanted and what teachers in schools could feasibly do. I am sure it was not always like this, but contrast this to today's, my own at least, experience as ICT coordinator in a county that has very few advisors left. If we want support with ICT in our school we have to buy in help from run-for-profit consultancies. When I contrast my current experiences of support to those of my colleagues in the past, yes, I do feel short-changed. It is that role of intermediary between policy and school which is missing, now it is all one way, policy (or strategy) on school.

JW: I'd like to go along with this, and can see it from, if you like an earlier generation. During those early years of computers in school, I was a teacher with a PET, BBC B and then Acorn Archimedes. Our successes would have been more difficult without the local authorities and the agencies like MESU, Blue File and the examples at BETT. I was fortunate to become a teacher advisor and work with schools, in schools teaching pupils as well as supporting teachers. The demise of that support was brought about by, what was very much, the commercialisation of the local authority who had to sell their services to schools. Something disappeared.

What are the achievements of the research community, where are tensions?

MH: I really agree with the participants that as a community we are theoretically weak and I think they cover why this is very well.

SY: Well, OK but let's look at the achievements first. For example what participants valued about ITTE, and other associations we mention, was the way they provided a way out of institutional isolation. Also, in the wider education community, those interested in computers were marginal, what ITTE and others did was to provide a counterbalance to this, too. Looking specifically at ITTE the idea of community is something we understand and experience, yet we have not articulated what this means; we need to explore our shared values, dig deeper, we need to leave traces for those coming through. So one thing which is an achievement is the way we care about each other, as well as the projects and technology we work with. For me the striking things is that ITTE has endured over time and with a stable set of values, which though not explicitly stated anywhere are deeply understood and shared by many. It is about supporting one another, helping to solve our problems, figuring it out; it is about lobbying when needed; and, it is not about delivering government agendas. But, we do maintain links with government agencies; we respond and give.

So looking back, what has being on the project given you?

SY: I can say something from the heart here. I guess that one lesson from this participation is to perhaps, how can I put it, dissolve the spaces more between our heads and hearts. As clearly, what emerged in the stories was a passion and caring about what we do. So, valuable for me to remember was that the opportunity exists when we meet, talk, either face to face or online through email, to carve out in both the formal and informal moments, those spaces that allow a meeting of 'hearts and minds', which bring a community of practice to life. Above all, it is when we meet that an engendering of trust emerges, re-merges or gets carved anew, for newcomers and those long around the scene. And, trust is not a decision as such, but rather grows cautiously and develops in the right spaces and interactions. It is when it is possible to share your thoughts, worries and fears, we can create a community. I am seeing this from an ITTE angle, other associations do similar work I am sure, but the message for me is that ITTE is a space where we can share our challenges and excitements, explore new and difficult ideas, ask searching questions, predicate propositions and take risks to seek something novel to us, to reinvent or awaken our curiosity with our own and others' learning through and with technology. ITTE offers a sense of working together. It gives us a sense of connectedness; alongside the opportunity to check out with knowledgeable others in the field whether I am on the right lines or need a bit of navigating in other directions, gently steered through exchanging repertoires. What feels like choppy waters to a lone yachts person may suddenly dissipate into the calm, waters of an ocean liner. Oh dear that is a bit romantic but I mean it, this is what they have done, this is the tradition we all need to understand and respect and I understand it a bit more from contributing to the project. Also, well it all sounds terribly 'luvvy', but it is important to honour the work others have done, dedicating honorary lectures and keynotes at our conferences and so on.

MH: I want to add some things. One, like you, I found their stories utterly compelling and I am so glad we did this project, that we remember the tradition. I loved those 'but yes I thought that too' moments, and I loved the fact they worked so hard and in many ways have had successful, well meaning careers and yet they could come up with so many ways they fell short! Two, the sense of engagement in work – the old distinction between work which engages the soul and labour which is thrust on you, and how it is so important to find spaces in which you work, not labour. Three, working on the project really gave me an understanding of time, remembering, for better or worse, that things were otherwise, those 'there was a time when …' moments. I am left with a feeling that what seems so fixed about teaching and learning is so much more temporary and than I had imagined, we are bounded by the times we live far more than I had realised, but knowing that is the only hope of being released from it. Oh dear that sounds like a cliché and good place to stop!