hire achievement

Could leasing schemes be the future of handheld technology in schools? TS investigates…

The fast moving world of consumer technology has become a major driving force in pushing forward significant changes in how school pupils now access and find information. The social impact of mobile devices, particularly smartphones, is well documented – but with the growing influence of iPads and other types of tablet computers changing the way we do business, it was only a matter of time before this flexible new alternative to the IT suite began to impact upon on the way we educate.

Many UK schools still operate a general ban on mobile devices. Indeed, Chief Inspector for Schools Sir Michael Wilshaw reignited the debate on banning devices during comments made in May 2012 indicating that schools should not tolerate the presence of mobiles in class to reduce behavioural disruption. The advice may have been welcomed by many in the educational establishment as justification for removing mobiles from the school environment, but could a mass ban dangerously underestimate the huge opportunity mobile and handheld devices present to engage with students?

According to the 2012 Communications Market Report by Ofcom into the impact of smartphones on everyday life, by 2011 nearly half of teenagers (47%)

owned a smartphone device, whereas tablet ownership grew from 2% to 11% in just 12 months. With so many young people using mobile devices to access information on a daily basis, handheld devices and tablet computers offer one of the strongest opportunities to offer flexible educational resources attractive to all ability levels.

Encouraging students to bring their own device to school has its challenges from an inclusivity perspective but it is a first step towards educators recognising the value of the devices languishing in a student's bag. Managing internal access arrangements to limit connectivity towards school-led resources and encouraging students to bring their own device has its merits, however what role do the larger, more expensive tablet computers have to play?

The tablet computer is one of the fastest growing consumer technology markets in the world. In 2012, Apple sold its 100 millionth iPad, an unprecedented number considering it was launched just two and a half years ago. Consumer appetite for tablets has bubbled over into a range of sectors as their versatility and functionality has been recognised across more business and commercial marketplaces in addition to health

and sciences and also, of course, education.

Leasing schemes have sky rocketed in popularity over the past two years as schools look for ways to put technology into the hands of students and support lessons in a more interactive and engaging way. Less clunky than a laptop and yet distinctly more versatile, a tablet has a wide range of uses in the classroom as a source of up-to-the minute information, as well as supporting creativity and the recording of information through notes, video and pictures.

Wallace High School is a voluntary grammar school in Lisburn, Northern Ireland and recently introduced a new leasing system to encourage all students, starting at key stage three, to have their own iPad device for use in the classroom and as an external learning resource. The school also invested in a range of web based tools for use with the iPads to enhance learning and communication outside of the traditional classroom setting, including a comprehensive range of revision podcasts through the award-winning GCSEPod, for example, which can be downloaded on to their tablet devices as well as personal Android, Apple and Blackberry handheld devices.

KEY RESOURCE

GCSEPod is a content provider of leading learning and revision podcasts, written by teachers and streamed or downloaded by students from a school's VLE platform or the GCSEPod mobile app using a school subscription. For further information, pay a visit to gcsepod.co.uk.
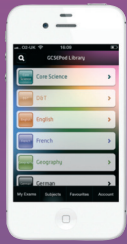
"Students today consume information in a very different way from previous generations," observes Wallace's ICT coordinator Jan McMath, "which is why we were keen to respond to the changing technology available to our students by introducing the iPad leasing system in 2011 for key stage 3."

"Students have been extremely keen to use handheld technology both in lessons and outside of it. We are always looking at ways to bring ICT into the classroom in a meaningful and engaging way. We use iPads to help our students film science experiments, create their own learning record and even develop their own podcasts," she adds. "Helping students to recognise that the technology they use day-to-day in a social context is a powerful learning resource is hugely important for a technologically savvy generation."

Whilst leasing schemes promote inclusivity amongst students, they also present an opportunity to schools to reduce spending around all area of ICT, not just hardware. Handheld devices are more geared towards supporting flexible and cost-efficient mobile apps over the more traditional larger scale hardware or software investment required to support new digital resources.

Mobile apps may be kept up to date more readily than traditional PC-led software programmes with quick and easy updates, and they are also easy to implement on the front line of teaching with the right training and understanding. However, what many schools overlook is that while mobile apps are a cost-effective resource, the relatively easy implementation and rollout can lead to misunderstanding concerning the size and technology demands of sometimes even the most basic of programs.

Mobile apps require varying levels of space on a device to operate effectively. Leasing systems offer a degree of control to ensure consistency across the size and type of devices available to support mobile apps with regular upgrades to keep students on an even playing field. However, the 'bring your own technology' approach highlights important issues to be aware of when making digital resources available for students. By not having the memory to support apps on a personal device, or perhaps a more basic phone contract, which only allows a certain amount of MB to be downloaded per month, the value of exciting new digital resources could be severely limited.

Unfortunately no handheld device is infinite in size, but large-scale investment in digital resources by a school relies on devices that have the capability to support them. In this case, leasing systems do present a more effective way to ensure students can fully utilise the resources made available to them over a BYOT approach.

"Increasingly we are being contacted by schools who have successfully incorporated digital resources into their bank of learning tools for students but are coming up against issues of memory size and bandwidth restrictions on students' devices," confirms Anthony Coxon, co-founder of GCSEPod. "We are now encouraging schools to take a more proactive approach with their students' devices, indicating the size and requirements of resources upfront as part of the internal promotion process to ensure students are fully aware of the benefits as well as the minimal technological demands of the service.

"Additionally, we are working with teachers and schools to share learnings about the implementation of digital resources and what questions teachers should be asking of services on the technology side during initial sales discussions," he continues. "It is up to companies such as ours to continue to provide a service which fits not only with the current technology available to students, but stays one step ahead to ensure we have one eye on maximising the potential of consumer technology and another on what could be the next major innovation for education."