

Last words

Are we in danger of letting our love affair with educational technology get out of hand? One teacher, who prefers to remain nameless, suspects so...

Look, let's get one thing out of the way right from the start. I am neither a technophobe nor a luddite. I don't want to return to the days when telephones had to be attached to the wall of your house in order to work, and I don't wistfully recall how wonderful it was to have to drag myself to the library every time I wanted to check some minor factual detail (or, if mid-argument, to have to sulkily concede a point despite knowing deep down that I was *right* if I could only get hold of the evidence to support my case). I love having the vast resources of the internet at my fingertips – and hey, I'm as fond of Angry Birds as the next person.

At the same time, however, I have to confess that the level of completely uncritical enthusiasm for the increasingly ubiquitous presence of technology in schools that I am witnessing at the moment is starting to concern me a little.

Perhaps it's my age. I won't lie – I've been teaching for a very long time indeed; so long, in fact, that many of my NQT colleagues simply wouldn't recognise the world in which I did my training. Essays written in ink on foolscap; lectures involving chalkboards and



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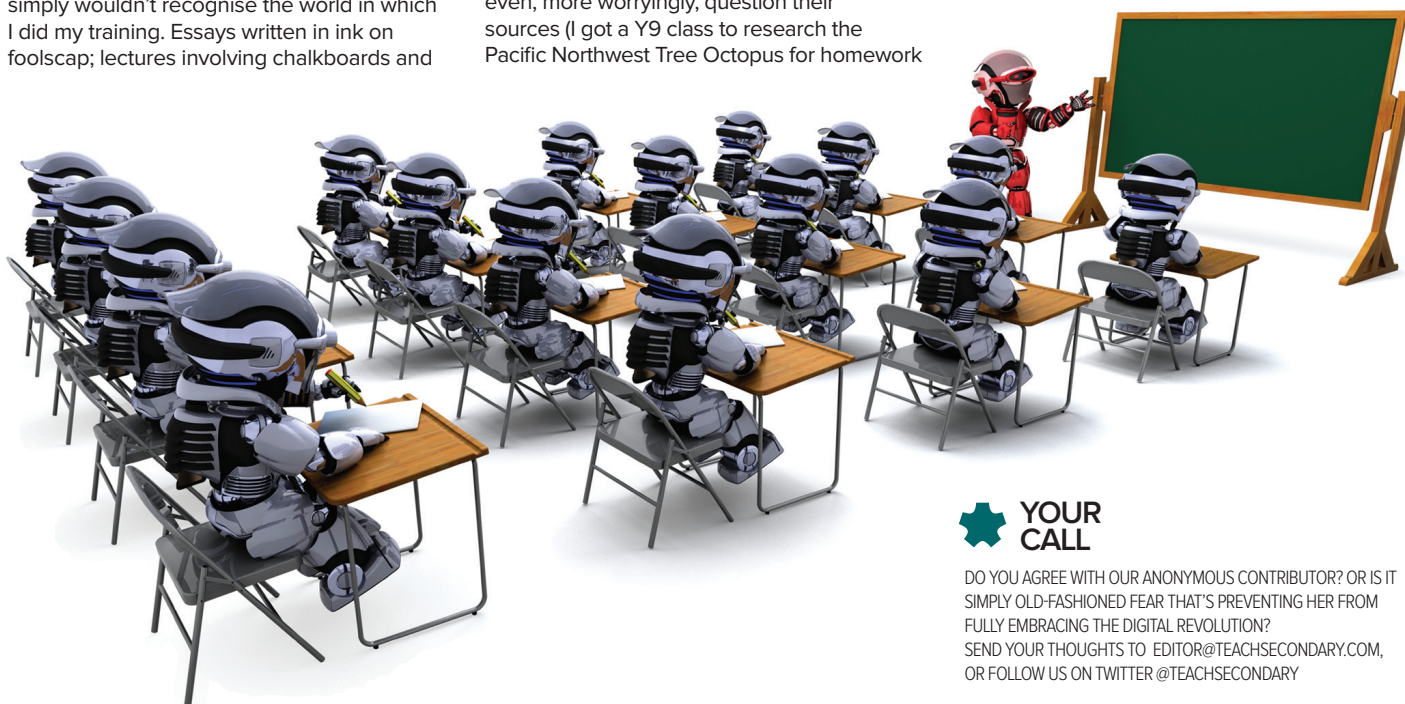
flipcharts; research conducted through approaching people with a clipboard and a tape recorder that required the operator to hold down the 'record' and 'play' buttons simultaneously in order to start it working; and of course, the unspoken but understood need to be where you said you would be, at the time you said you would be there. Somehow, I managed to struggle my way towards a set of qualifications despite these handicaps – and though I wouldn't say that I think the introduction of modern gadgetry that enables today's students to write essays, enjoy lectures, conduct research and get together with each other to share ideas much more easily than I ever could is a bad thing... I can't help but wonder whether they might perhaps benefit from a little low-tech action alongside the touchscreens and HD video.

Instead, though, what I see is more devices, more software, more shortcuts, more whistles and bells. Schools are splashing out on tablets, interactive whiteboards, laptops and games consoles – and teachers are spending more and more time on Twitter, discussing with each other how best they can use them. And in the meantime, no one is teaching anyone how to use a dictionary; remember times tables or spelling rules; sharpen a pencil; or even, more worryingly, question their sources (I got a Y9 class to research the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus for homework

recently; depressingly, just two out of thirty kids realised that it wasn't a real species).

I know we're living in a digital age now. I realise that our young people have to be taught in a way that accurately reflects the world into which we're planning on sending them once they're finished with formal education, and given the skills they will need to thrive and succeed in that world. My question is, why is there an assumption that those skills will *entirely* revolve around technology? And a supplementary query: what happens when the batteries run out? When the programme freezes, or the device is dropped onto concrete or into a puddle? What if Wikipedia were suddenly wiped from existence, or Google inexplicably went offline for a week?

I know it's an urban myth, but it all rather reminds me of the story that pops up from time to time about how at the height of the space race, the Americans spent millions of dollars developing a pen that would write in zero gravity... whilst the Russians simply supplied their astronauts with pencils. Bring on the technology by all means – but please, let's remember to teach our young people how to live without it, too.



YOUR CALL

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