

## Teachers lag behind students

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John Cuthell has been looking at who does what with their computers.

The emergence of computers as consumer goods during the past two years has been accompanied by their marketing as bundled products: the consumer buys a couple of boxes, plugs the components together, turns on the power and the whole system is ready to use.

No arcane manuals: they aren't supplied. No more arguments over who has the television set to display the computer games: a 15-inch monitor is better. Don't worry about programs: they're all installed. With a sound card, speakers, CD-Rom drive and a clutch of discs - games, reference works and an encyclopedia - young people can persuade their families that this isn't yet another piece of electronic bric-a-brac: it's the way of the future.

As the Microsoft advertising slogan asks, "Where do you want to go today?" To underline the learning link, the retailer Dixons has placards above the machines on sale proclaiming "Work Hard, Play Hard".

Does this really have any impact on education? Or is it a more expensive sop to those young people who, in recent years, talked their way into a Commodore Amiga as a Christmas present on the grounds that they needed a computer for their school work, then spent their evenings playing computer games, rather than assignments? ("Well, you see, the discs don't work at school . . . and I haven't got a printer . . . and . . .") Research during the past two years at Boston Spa, a comprehensive with about 1,800 students and 110 teachers near Leeds, West Yorkshire, which was undertaken with the University of Huddersfield, has shown a significant increase during this time in the number of young people with access to a Windows-based PC. A recent survey of secondary schools by the Computer Education Group in the publication Computer Education has shown the increasing dominance of IBM-compatible PCs.

Running the mouse-controlled Windows operating system, they are now seen by many as the de facto standard. This position is mirrored among school students, whose working environment at home reflects this. While a significant number of these machines are redundant office equipment, and use older 486 processors, the Christmas holidays see a surge in ownership of multimedia computers.

When Boston Spa students were asked why they used their computers, their answers indicated that the ability to produce well-presented text was seen as the main reason: "You get better marks if the teacher can read it." Other students cited an increase in output, and the availability of reference tools such as spell-checks and thesaurus to remove errors. Those with CD-Rom referred to the ability to look up information quickly, while they were working.

When asked how they used their computers, a picture emerged of them listening to CDs, switching to games when they were bored or stuck, and working on two or three assignments at the same time. Whether or not this multi-tasking is real or wishful thinking, matters less than the fact that this is what young people think it should be like.

And what of their teachers? When they completed the same survey, 43 per cent of staff respondents said they had access to a PC at home. This nearly matched the 49 per cent of student respondents who had one. However, while all of the students who had a PC at home used it for work, this was not the case with their teachers. Fewer than 25 per cent of them actually used their PCs at home. The primary use for those who did was "typing".

It seems that the skills gap between many students and their teachers is wide - and is still widening. Whatever the reasons - lack of time, the cost of computers that need updating regularly, or a residual belief that work produced on computers is too easy and that learning ought to be hard work - the result is that many computer tasks set by teachers focus on low-level skills. And there is surprisingly little research conducted from the point of view of our students and their expectations.

Meanwhile, what do we do with our multi-tasking cyborgs, the students, many of whom now have sophisticated equipment for their work at home, but who have to sit through school time using their school's limited IT resources, or, horror of horrors, a pen and paper?

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