

University of Dundee

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Bain, Yvonne

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EITN Issue 17 Book Reviews

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Effective Teaching with Internet Technologies

A. Pritchard

London: Paul Chapman Publishing (2008), pp. 132, Pbk., £18.99, ISBN 9781412930956

Reviewed by Yvonne Bain, School of Education, University of Aberdeen

The six chapters of the book focus on learning within schools and include topics on learning theories; pedagogic applications of the internet as a learning resource either for pupils working individually or in groups; and working collaboratively with peers across the globe. Each chapter (except the last one) has a useful mini advance-organiser highlighting the themes that will be met and, for chapters three to five, suggested questions to think about whilst reading. Throughout the book there is reference in passing to research in and around ICT for learning (the work of Michael Hammond, David Jonassen, Michelle Selinger and Bridget Somekh, for example) although some of these references are merely used to highlight that the book does not tackle the issues of ICT as a curriculum subject. The focus is strongly on learning through the use of technology (the World Wide Web in particular) and not learning about technology.

I was keen to read Pritchard's discussion of learning theories in relation to the use of the internet but was disappointed with the first chapter in the attention given to the learning theories with not much discussion to link this to the use of the Internet. If I had wanted a review of learning theories, then this would not be my preference even if it does include reference to the expected theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner and Flavell. That said, I can appreciate the role that this has in overtly setting out the rationale for considering a constructivist approach to learning through the use of the Internet. More positively, the continued consideration given to learning in the other chapters gives the clear message that learning is at the heart of using the internet with pupils and not the technology itself.

The core of the book is about case studies of teachers' use of the internet with examples such as online numeracy games, virtual museums and synagogues, and health and well-being resources. A cautionary note is that the case studies are all from Primary Schools (with one exception of one Junior School), something that I feel should have been reflected in the title of the book, or at least mentioned in the blurb. I like the format of the case studies, which includes commentary on the pedagogical and theoretical considerations. Pritchard reviews all the case studies against the characteristics of a constructivist approach which encouraged me to at least think a little more about the pupils' learning. At times however, I felt that the commentary of whether the internet technology really made a difference was superficial. For example, Case Study 5.2 indicates that the video conferencing was essential to the success of learning as without it the lessons could not have taken place with the specialist language teacher. There was no commentary about the differences in experience when the lesson was by video conference, especially since some of the lessons were given face-to-face by the specialist teacher. I also felt I wanted to know if the technology 'got in the way' at all – for example what about potential difficulties for the specialist teacher seeing who was contributing or any difficulties with time-delays in the system as is sometimes experienced? Similarly, and this may seem trivial, in Case Study 4.3 the class teacher notes that it would have been difficult to use headphones in a pairs activity to reduce the noise disruption to the class, but no note is made in the commentary to highlight the availability of splitters that would allow two sets of headphones to be used with one computer thereby allowing the teacher to carry out the activity as desired.

This is not a book that considers future possibilities for learning and teaching through ICT. The lack of consideration of other internet technologies for communication on the internet such as blogging, twittering or other modes I don't think is a particular issue when many teachers will still be considering how to make best use of World Wide Web resources or be thinking about how they might capitalise on the use of video conferencing for synchronous communication. Regardless of the technology the message would still be to think about the learning and the learners first. What Pritchard offers is a reassurance that when you focus on learning, the internet is at least as good as learning through 'non-internet resources'.

At the time of reviewing the book, the “companion website” was not available but such is the drawback of relying on websites – you can never be sure that the site will still be available when you would like to use it. However, if it exists, then the blurb suggests that this will be a useful additional resource. I would hope that this would say more about sites like BECTA (which only gets mentioned in a brief reference to internet safety) and Learning and Teaching Scotland, both of which provide invaluable links to case studies, relevant curriculum links and links to further research.

The blurb suggests that the book “*will appeal to teachers in training as well as practising teachers, ICT coordinators and those on CPD courses*”. I would suggest that is a tall order for any book but I do think that it would be most suitable for new teachers, particularly as an additional resource for supporting consideration of learning with and through ICT in the Primary curriculum as part of an Initial Teacher Education programme.