

Backup

Word Power

It could not have escaped your notice that every Tom, Dick and Harriet has jumped on the bandwagon, and is now offering courses in IT. The fact that in nine cases out of ten you could fit all of their knowledge of IT onto the back of a postage stamp and still have room for marginal notes does not seem to deter them.

And why should it? After all, have not we, the IT co-ordinators, been telling our colleagues for at least the past five years that IT is as easy as falling off a log, and that anyone can do it? So, if the Business Studies department thinks it can offer a course in IT skills, presumably because the computer keyboard bears an uncanny resemblance to a typewriter, who are we to say "No"? (If we decline to offer a Business Studies course based on our experience of having a bank account, that's our look-out).

Similarly, if the Geography department wants to run a course in IT skills in the 6th Form, on the grounds that they know how to use a spreadsheet for organising rainfall statistics, perhaps we should offer Orienteering courses based on our in-depth knowledge of how to use the A-to-Z.

As you may have gathered, I'm not too impressed with all this, but as I implied at the start of this article, we have only ourselves to blame. In our genuine quest to do the right thing by the pupils, and to make IT accessible to all, we have played down the higher-level skills that we've acquired, telling colleagues that they're not really necessary.

As a very simple example, when was the last time you brought a colleague to book for pressing the ENTER key twice at the end of each paragraph in order to space the document out, instead of modifying the paragraph style? When was the last time you told a colleague that the laborious formula s/he has spent half an hour entering into the spreadsheet could have been passed over in favour of one of the three hundred built-in functions that came with the software? In fact, when was the last time you told a colleague that Bloggs Minor's pathetic drawings of matchstick people using Paintbrush represent a much higher order of IT skills than the kid who's just reproduced the Mona Lisa, because at least Bloggs Minor used the cut and paste function? Come to that, perhaps Smith Major's



decision to ignore the computer altogether, because a set of felt tips produces a more suitable effect, has shown a far sounder grasp of IT principles than both of them put together.

No, you didn't raise any of these issues, and I'll tell you why. You were scared that your colleagues might not like the idea of having to think about your subject as well as their own. They may have cancelled all of their department's bookings in the computer rooms. And where would your cross-curricular, progressive, continuous five year IT policy be then?

And now look at you: crying into your soup because everyone thinks they are the experts and you are just the technician, and there's an OFSTED report being printed that says the level of IT capability achieved by the pupils is lower than it was when they were in kindergarten.

While we are unable to turn back the clock and undo our past mistakes, we can at least learn from them. At the root of the problem is our desire to demystify the subject: we have gone too far. In any area of human endeavour there is a body of technical terminology which performs two distinct and important functions. First, it enables the participants to communicate with each other effectively. Secondly, it keeps outsiders, who perceive the technical terminology as mere jargon, at a safe distance.

Therefore the first step in our quest to regain our academic standing in the staffroom is to insist that the correct terms are used. The next time someone uses the term "memory" when it is obvious that what they really mean is "hard disk space", put them firmly in their place. Similarly, when someone mentions the use of a "database", ask them condescendingly if they don't mean "database management system".

The second step is to recognise the wonderful opportunity presented by the so-called information superhighway. When someone asks you if the school is connected to the internet, suggest that it would have been had there been a more local PoP, or if "they" had established a more stable SLIP connection. Make sure you learn as many TLAs as you can, and make up a few of your own. Don't worry about not knowing what all this means, because nobody else does either. The important point here is that you're showing your colleagues that not only are you completely au fait with the cutting edge of technology, but also that there is no point whatsoever in their attempting to give the impression of knowing anything about it.

Of course, these two strategies only address your academic, as opposed to your pedagogical credentials. Once again, the power of the word can be brought into play. Insist that although formal summative assessment is no longer required at the end of Key Stage 3, as teachers we still need to carry out formative and ipsative assessment. Mention (in passing) curricular models such as Bruner's spiral curriculum, or the implications of Ausubel's concept of advance organisers. None of these terms has been made up, which obviously enhances your credibility should someone go to the trouble of checking.

What if, as a result of all these activities, people throw in the towel, and refuse to have anything further to do with the delivery of IT. Great! That's exactly what you want. The boss will have to timetable discrete teaching in IT, which will give you the chance to help the children reach their full potential in this subject that is so dear to your heart. And as a beneficial side effect, it will take the teaching of IT out of the hands of those who know far too much about it for their own good, and far too little for anyone else's.

Lance Sharpe