Why schools should be sending IT bods, not just teachers, to BETT 2015

First published December 10 2014

The same dilemma stroke argument appears around this time each and every year, and this year is no different it seems: Who should a school be sending along to BETT in London?

BETT is an amazing event, a true mix of innovative educational technologies on show and the chance to listen to and discuss with some of the pioneers of the teaching profession. Tens of thousands of people decend on the ExCel again in January over four days, to attend some of over one hundred presentations and seminars (or summits, depending on how important one wants to make themselves feel!) and with plenty of opportunity to sample some of the hundreds of trade stands selling everything from the latest VLE software, to large touch screens, to laptop charging stations to wifi technology to legal and union aid. As a seventh year veteran now of BETT, even I find it difficult not to be swept away with the excitement and wonder of the new ideas on teaching, learning, interacting, supporting, networking, and the wonders and possibilities of all the technology on offer; what that could do for 'my class', 'my school', 'my students'. And BETT is all geared up to present and produce exactly that.

And it is for this reason why just sending a teacher, or just sending someone from the academic side of the school is at best wasteful, at worst dangerous.

Teachers are wonderful individuals and I take my hat off to them every time; most are very hard working, but importantly dedicated to each and every one of their students and want to give the very best experience in their school lives as possible. Yet, with such unwavering dedication comes often a sense of tunnel vision; focusing on what is best for them, their students, their class and the perceived best for the school through their eyes, often not seeing the detail of just what goes into supporting the school and its many facets, from technology, to finances, administration, logistics… the list goes on. This is certainly not a jibe at the teacher, for really they should be dedicated to that almost single vision and do the things they are very best at – this is why there are administrators, cleaners, IT staff, business staff, finance staff, maintenance staff… doing the jobs they are good at.

So then given BETT is so diverse across school needs, but naturally centres on technology to support education (not just delivery education), why are schools so insistent on only sending teachers, department heads, curriculum leaders and deputy heads?

Why are the IT staff – technicians, network managers, IT directors, not involved in the clearly technology-centric exhibition?

Surely they are best placed to identify what technology across the board, not just for the science labs, is worth pursuing, and having the right knowledge there and then to have a worthwhile conversation with stand staff? As opposed to having a leaflet thrust in front of them the following week and the investigative process begins all over again (I won't start on the added time wasted here!).

Surely IT staff are best placed to know, and probably built, the strategic plan for IT within the school going forward, know what new technology that may involve, be able to assess suitable and non-suitable products and solutions, and again be in the right place to assess these further?

Surely IT staff are best placed to distinguish between a good solution and a bad one, if not at the show through research and feedback and networking, particularly on the technical issues, and fundamentally how such a solution fits (if at all) into the schools IT set up (basically, how easy or difficult will it be to install x software onto all the computers is all the IT suites?)

I mentioned earlier the word dangerous. While somewhat dramatic, is an accurate assessment if the enthusiasm not tempered by objective big-picture thought CAN result in financially or technically crippling consequences (And I have first hand experience of seeing this play out).

Academic staff will not know these details, and respectfully nor should they! This is what IT staff are paid for (in part). Teachers will once again be like kids in a candy store at BETT, and so they should be. It is an exciting, informative, eye-opening experience particularly at the presentations and seminars. So let them do their job, earn some CPD and send along an IT bod as well to BETT 2015!