Assessing ICT at Key Stage 3

This is a brief account of an informal survey of the way in which a sample of about 20 London schools assess pupils in the curriculum subject ICT during Key Stage 3.

Assessment of course can mean many things and be done for a variety of purposes. Here I look in particular at the ways in which pupils attainment was assessed in relation to the National Curriculum for ICT. Although no claim is made that the patterns of assessment observed here are true more generally, they do fit with criticisms of Key Stage 3 ICT assessment made by Ofsted over a number of years. I believe that they also highlight again the uncertainty that exists about the purpose of ICT teaching and of the meaning of the National Curriculum, and the strong need for the production and effective dissemination of a significant body of exemplar material.

At what times are the Attainment Targets of the ICT National Curriculum assessed?

In the schools surveyed, assessment against National Curriculum levels was made almost exclusively at the end of Key Stage 3, or in a few cases at the end of each year. In almost no case was pupil attainment routinely assessed against the National Curriculum on a lesson-by-lesson basis. This is in contrast with the teaching of many other curriculum areas where pupil progress - and the lesson sequences designed to ensure it - are planned from the first to ensure progression with respect to the National Curriculum. In almost all the school, day-to-day monitoring of pupil progression was in terms of skill development rather than the National Curriculum.

How are the Levels of Attainment assessed?

Given that informal or formative assessment was rarely made against the Attainment Targets of the National Curriculum, only summative assessment was seen. Three methods were used: written exams, practical exercises and a single extended project.

Written exams:

These tended to concentrate on facts, and often ones of dubious relevance. For example the question 'How many rows and columns does a spreadsheet have?' was seen on more than one occasion. Written exams were very rarely used to assess capability. For example it would be possible to give pupils examples of work written using a variety of fonts and layouts and ask them to assess their suitability for different audiences. This clearly assesses against the National Curriculum - but was not seen. Instead, 'book knowledge' of skills was assessed and then scaled against the National Curriculum levels. The rationale for such scaling was not clear.

Practical exercises:

In the (few) schools which assessed using a variety of practical examples, a typical exercise was "Create a Hyperstudio stack about a circus". Here, a 1 page stack was given level 4, two/three pages level 5 and four level 6. Again the rationale for this equivalence was not clear.

Extended project:

This was seen in one school and provided the clearest link with the National Curriculum level statements. Pupils had to research and produce two 4-page booklets giving the reasons for the second world war - one from the German and one from the British point of view. This interesting exercise allowed the teacher to assess the pupils against the following level statements:

Level 5 Pupils select the information they need for different purposes, check its accuracy and organise it in a form suitable for processing. They use ICT to structure, refine and present information in different forms and styles for specific purposes and audiences.

Level 6 Pupils develop and refine their work to enhance its quality, using information from a range of sources. They present their ideas in a variety of ways and show a clear sense of audience.

Level 7 Pupils combine information from a variety of ICT-based and other sources for presentation to different audiences.

However, as this was the only form of assessment used, the other aspects of the Key Stage 3 National Curriculum were not assessed.

So what?

This lack of monitoring of pupil progress means that pupil progression towards ICT capability is not being either assessed or assured in many schools. The focus in these schools is on the assessment of skills, which can be more easily measured - a trait shared of course by the government (especially) in its planned ICT test for trainee teachers.

Further, the form of testing used strongly suggests that in many schools there is still a real lack of clarity of what the National Curriculum, and especially progression through it means. This is evidenced further by reaction of teachers to the lesson plans for some of my PGCE students who are required to plan for progression in NC terms. Two examples. In one case a short set of lessons was planned for year 10 and targeted at level 2 - the attainment expected of the average 7 year old. The school regarded this as acceptable (indeed correct) because "These pupils do not have much experience of databases…". In the second case a sequence of lesson was planned where Lesson 1 was targeted at level 2; lesson 2 at level 3; lesson 3 at level 4 and so on until lesson 7 was targeted at level 8. Nothing odd was seen in this rate of progress.

The key problems seems to be that the Attainment Targets are written in very 'wooly' language. One cannot tell what they mean by just reading the words. Take for example the statements:

> "They use ICT to structure, refine and present information in different forms and styles for specific purposes and audiences." (Level 5) and
> "They present their ideas in a variety of ways and show a clear sense of audience. " (Level 6)

How (precisely) is one to know which of these levels corresponds to a particular piece of work? Until we are clear what the NC means, it is hard to assess against it - or plan for progression through it.

There is an absolutely clear need here for teachers to have access to a significant body of exemplar material, and to be part of the production and dissemination of such material. What we have (just) started doing, together with colleagues and students on the primary PGCE, is trying to put together a set of such exemplar materials. The hope is that through this we can 'make real' the idea of progression in the curriculum - at least to ourselves. More importantly perhaps, it is hoped that the exercise of attempting to produce such material will give use a greater understanding of what 'ICT capability' means and focus our students' attention on this rather than simply on the teaching of basic software skills.