Information Communications Technology (ICT) in the classroom.
What can I do this year?

By Anne White - National Coordinator

Outside school, children engage confidently with ICT in their social and recreational lives. It seems inevitable that classrooms will, in time, reflect these changing lifestyle patterns. While the advent of ICT integration in the classroom can be daunting, we are all aware that it can be a hugely positive addition to the learning environment. ICT can bring rich and varied learning resources into the classroom which can lead to the creation of a more dynamic, rewarding and productive learning environment. As cables, wires and routers arrive to connect your schools to the broadband network, many teachers and students will be embarking on a new digital journey. This journey may seem overwhelming to some, but remember, it only has to begin with a single click.

First and foremost, ICT should be considered as a tool which can assist and support the delivery of the curriculum. This is where its real power and value lie. Successful adoption and integration of ICT in learning usually lies in the process undertaken by teachers and students as much as the product itself. One needs to establish what could possibly work best for your classroom and for the needs of your children. No one knows that better than you. The ability to plan for ICT at outset and thence to reflect on its usage is critical. Approaches will develop over time; as they do with other classroom methodologies. Some common questions posed by teachers include: “That sounds great, but where do I begin in my school?” “What do I need to know?” “I don’t know anything about computers. How do I learn the skills that can help me implement this technology effectively in my classroom?” With all of these things in mind, I will present some ideas as to what your ICT journey for 2005/2006 could involve.

Using the Digital Camera
Let’s take the new history and geography curricula as an example — a central component of both these curricula is the exploration of the local area. Is there scope for using technology here? Of course there is; and in a very simple way. Using the digital camera, children can take photographs of buildings and people in their local area and begin to build their own local history archive which can be presented in digital format or indeed in traditional book format. In time, as confidence levels increase, the use of multimedia can be explored. This can then be shared on the Web for others to access. Some schools have already done this, e.g., Inver National School in Belmullet (http://www.iol.ie/~bmullets/). In Navan Education Centre, the ICT Advisor there has encouraged schools to use digital cameras and scanners to create simple information sheets on monuments and items of historic and geographical interest in their neighbourhoods (http://www.ncte.ie/navanec/dig.htm).

The digital camera can also act as a fantastic tool in capturing the work of children. We are all too familiar with the beautiful artworks created by children and displayed on classroom walls, which are taken down after two weeks, never to be seen again. Why not take photos and keep a record of all the wonderful work created? Children are very capable of using the camera themselves and there are extensive possibilities for senior classes working with junior classes on these activities. The creation of an e-portfolio of artwork in your class may be your ICT goal for this year and something which could be shared with parents and the community. Even better, children could share their work with a global audience by submitting their pictures to the gallery on the I Am An Artist website (http://www.iamanartist.ie/gallery/gallery.aspx). We have received some wonderful submissions to date!

Using the Digital Video Camera
The use of digital video in a learning context presents huge opportunities for learners. Yes, there is a learning curve involved and again it is the process not the end product that is important. The Fionn Science Project, which involved over 20 schools in the Galway area, is
one example where children have been using digital video whilst exploring the science curriculum. This project has grown over a number of years; at their own pace and in line with curriculum objectives, both the teachers and students involved in this project have developed and refined their ICT skills on a continuous basis. Their work will soon be featured on the Sci-Spy website (www.sci-spy.ie). But where can one learn how to use a digital video camera or how to integrate this with curriculum learning objectives? Well, your local education centre runs a large number of part-time courses for primary teachers, including one entitled Digital Video in Education (http://www.ncte.ie/ICTTraining/Courses/).

Before concluding on this topic, it would be remiss not to mention the FíS project (www.fis.ie). FíS was designed to introduce the medium of film as a support to the Primary School Curriculum. Children have been actively involved in film-making using digital video technologies and the response from teachers, students and the local community has been very positive. Teachers commented on the value added to the curriculum, giving them a greater understanding of the potential technology can play in the delivery of the curriculum. Students have demonstrated immense creativity, responsibility and knowledge in the design of their films. The project has also given students with special needs the opportunity to play a very active role in their learning.

The lead role which the pupil plays in these ICT projects must not be underestimated. In both the Fionn and FíS projects, children are encouraged to take the lead, to problem solve collectively and to take responsibility for design decisions. The teacher is there to guide and facilitate this learning.

Using the Internet
As you will have seen from the projects above, ICT doesn’t always have to be about the Internet. However, the Internet does present huge opportunities for sharing ideas and accessing information. But perhaps you’ve had some time-consuming, fruitless journeys on the Internet? Haven’t we all! Scoilnet (www.scoilnet.ie), the portal for Irish Education, would be one good starting point for you. It contains a ‘resource finder’ in which you can search through a vast array of websites, all of which have been categorised by curriculum strand and reviewed by Irish teachers. Furthermore, if you feel you need to learn more about using the Internet, you could undertake the NCTE’s Internet & Email for Learning course in your local education centre.

Back in the classroom, how can you integrate the Internet into classroom activities? Story Time on Scoilnet (Scoilnet > Students > Primary) provides one excellent example. While developing literacy skills, children can write, edit and submit their stories to a large audience. Work like this could be undertaken on a whole-class or group basis. Again, it may be something which the senior classes could do in conjunction with the junior classes. Many Irish children have published their stories on Story Time and it offers children an alternative approach to reading stories. Of course, parents can also view the children’s work on Story Time and it gives children a great sense of pride and motivation.

What about support and professional development?
Your first port of call should be the NCTE website (www.ncte.ie). It provides information on the 18 different ICT professional development courses available (http://www.ncte.ie/ICTTraining/Courses/), as well as an up-to-date schedule of those currently being run or due to roll out. Courses are fully funded and focus on integrating ICT into the school curriculum, while also advancing teachers’ ICT skills. In addition to the wide range of scheduled courses available, courses can also be run as whole-school events.
Courses include *Internet & Email for Learning, ICT & Special Needs* and, for the more technically advanced teachers, *Website Design & Development for Learning*.

We encourage you to participate in these courses as this has been the starting point for many of the teachers who are now actively using ICT in their daily teaching.

**ICT Advisor Network**
There is an ICT Advisor based in your local education centre. The ICT Advisor can visit your school and provide focused and targeted assistance in addressing the specific ICT needs of your school. As teachers, they are well positioned to assist you in the development of your ideas for ICT usage in the classroom. They can also organise support groups which look at specific areas such as ICT planning & particular software application skills.

The most valuable resources on this digital journey are the children themselves. They are eager to engage and ready to adapt to the technology. I hope that you will begin to take the first steps on your digital journey during this year and will access the various support mechanisms available to you. For those of you who are already travelling, do share your story with us as it acts as a great encouragement to others and provides us with a bank of ideas! Go n-éirí libh.