

According to BBC reports, The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, England's exams regulator, is advising ministers to scrap their plans for a compulsory computer test for teenagers. To which the only possible response is: hooray! The aim was for all 14-year-olds to do the online test in ICT (information and communication technology) from 2008. It is currently being piloted widely, but it seems that ministers questioned the need for another statutory test, and the QCA watchdog has now decided it is an unnecessary 'burden' for schools. It says the test should be just one tool teachers use to assess progress.

The QCA is a fascinating organisation, staffed by responsible adults in suits. It produces tons of earnest documents, all of them possessing a single common property, namely that of reducing their readers' will to live. Put such an organisation in charge of designing a curriculum on ICT, and you can predict the result: An Old Person's Guide to ICT.

The Old Person's ICT Curriculum (OPIC) has three 'themes': 'using ICT systems'; 'finding and exchanging information'; and 'developing and presenting information'. The first involves learning a Key Skill -- that of 'interacting with ICT for a purpose'. Pupils should be taught important things like 'take a turn playing a screen-based game, using a mouse, selecting options and keying in information'. Teachers should ensure that pupils are able to 'choose between option buttons displayed on a cashpoint screen', 'follow instructions when using interactive TV' and 'receive a text message to make arrangements, e.g. where to meet a friend'.

Now I know what you're thinking, dear reader. You think I am making this up. In that case, can I refer you to the QCA's draft 'ICT Skill for Life Curriculum Document' released in September 2005 and available online from [www.qca.org.uk](http://www.qca.org.uk)?

There's a surreal quality to the QCA's ICT curriculum. It conjures up images of kids up and down the country trudging into ICT classes and being taught how to use a mouse and click on hyperlinks; receiving solemn instructions in the creation of documents using Microsoft Word and of spreadsheets using Excel; being taught how to create a toy database using Access and a cod PowerPoint presentation; and generally being bored out of their minds.

And then the same kids go home and log onto Bebo or MySpace to update their profiles, run half a dozen simultaneous Instant Messaging conversations, use Skype to make free phone calls, rip music from CDs they've borrowed from friends, twiddle their thumbs to send incomprehensible text messages, view silly videos on YouTube and use BitTorrent to download episodes of 'Lost'.

And when you ask them what they did at school today they grimace and say 'We made a PowerPoint presentation, Dad. Yuck!'

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Speaking of PowerPoint, in recent months, an exquisite form of torture involving the program has surfaced in the geek community. It works like this: the victim stands up before an exuberant and irreverent audience. The game controller then launches a random PowerPoint presentation with which the 'presenter' is completely unfamiliar and he or she has to ad-lib a way through it. It's called PowerPoint Karaoke. Warning: don't try this at work: your boss might not be amused.

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Seymour Papert, the great MIT computer scientist who has written eloquently about children and computers, would not be in the least surprised by the parlous state of the ICT curriculum in British schools. His view -- expressed in a series of memorable books -- is that computers are intrinsically emancipatory devices whereas schools are basically institutions of control. The problem is intensified by the fact that kids know more about computers than teachers do, which means that the technology also threatens to undermine the authority of teachers. So the response of the school system is to try and control the technology -- for example by creating roped-off spaces called 'ICT rooms' or 'computer labs' where pupils can access the technology only under ludicrously restricted conditions.

This also explains why so much ICT teaching consists of training in the use of Microsoft software -- preparing kids to use the ageing tools of an old paradigm -- rather than educating them for life in a networked society where they will need different kinds of knowledge, and skills as yet undreamt-of by the QCA. By failing to recognise this, we are not only boring our children but also doing them a great disservice. Our schools are providing ICT training, whereas what is needed is ICT education.

To appreciate the distinction, think of sex. Would we be happy if schools provided sex training rather than sex education for our children? You only have to ask the question to know the answer.

I said that Professor Papert would not be in the least surprised by what's happening, and I believe that to be true. But I can't check it with him because he was hit by a motorcycle in Hanoi before Christmas and has been in a coma ever since. Here's hoping he comes back to us.

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