

Transforming Learning Through Online Storytelling:
'Making the News' Evaluation Report



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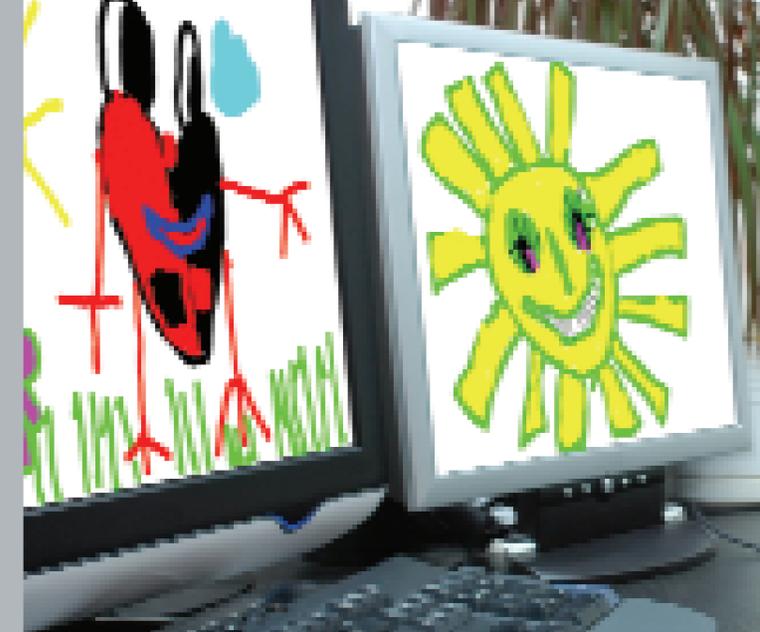
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Summary



This report presents the findings from an independent evaluation undertaken by the University of Hertfordshire of the 'Making The News project' as it functioned within the East of England Broadband Network region (E2BN). Making the News represents a set of simple tools that allow teachers and students to rapidly produce 'news' stories and publish them on line. It was developed by the Centre for New Media at the Open University in conjunction with E2BN.

The effective use of new technology within schools is seen as central to the transformation to a system based on personalised learning. In particular technology is seen to influence 'what, how and why children learn'.

The evaluation was designed to inform how to best make use of the 'making the news' project. The central aim of the project was to evaluate the impact, effectiveness and future potential of the 'making the news' concept. The evaluation of MTN was a small-scale study that adopted a case study approach using a high user school, as the main evaluation component.

The findings of this evaluation illustrate the ways that 'Making the News' can offer an e-safe environment for teachers and students to collaboratively create a positive impact on learning.

Impact on learning: From the perspective of the child, there seemed to be distinctly positive differences between creating a text as part of MTN and more traditionally based, classroom approaches to writing. In the case study school MTN appeared to have a transformational effect on the child's relationship to learning, by facilitating the children to be motivated self-directed learners.

The enhancement of ICT skills such as being able to publish online was clearly addressed by MTN, however children also learnt how to appropriately use and employ a host of other technologies and software such as videos, digital cameras and PowerPoint.

Personalising learning: Teaching staff reported that MTN functioned as a valuable strategy for attracting and holding the attention of pupils who may be disengaged from more standard approaches to literacy teaching.

Collaborative working: The 'news team' concept requires the children to work collaboratively in order to complete a finished story; they not only have to construct text, supporting material such as interviews, videos and photographs but also work collaboratively to assemble the story and being able edit each others reports. The flexibility offered by the MTN story production process and the child-led nature of the news team approach also appeared to allow children to be encouraging and supportive of fellow peers activities and achievements. MTN that may offer schools an additional tool in their repertoire to support positive peer relations and promote emotional well-being.

Self-esteem: MTN appeared to impact positively on children's sense of well-being in school, providing a positive sense of accomplishment and personal significance. MTN also appeared to support children in portraying positive attitudes towards the school as well as their own and their peers' achievements.

E-safety: Children were knowledgeable about the ethical rules they needed to follow and had an awareness of how to approach online publishing in a way that protected their safety.

Making a positive contribution: Children valued being able to positively contribute to and report on issues that they felt were of relevance and importance to other young people.

Extending the involvement of parents: Children reported that parental interest in their stories was high, with parents and children actively reading the stories together. It seems that as medium to engage parents in their children's life at school MTN may be fertile ground on which to develop parental involvement strategies.

Added value for the school: From the perspective of the school MTN also functioned as a strategic resource, serving as an accessible and lively means to document the work of the children and the distinctive character of the school.

MODELLING EFFECTIVE USE

Drawing on the review of usage and the in-depth case study analysis a number of characteristics appear to be conducive to sustained usage of MTN:

1. Child-led central core: children need to be able to exercise autonomy, decision-making and leadership over the MTN story production process.
2. The 'fun' factor: Online publishing as a learning process for the students that needs to allow scope for experimentation and fun.
3. Resource support: computer availability, digital recording equipment and a child accessible space, are basic core resource commitments.
4. Teacher facilitation: Main teaching roles are monitoring, moderation and ensuring e-safety.
5. Part of the school culture: Commitment to the MTN project needed to be embedded into the life and culture of the school.
6. Sustainability: Succession planning for the next generation of students is key to the sustainability of the MTN project.



The Child, the Internet and e-learning

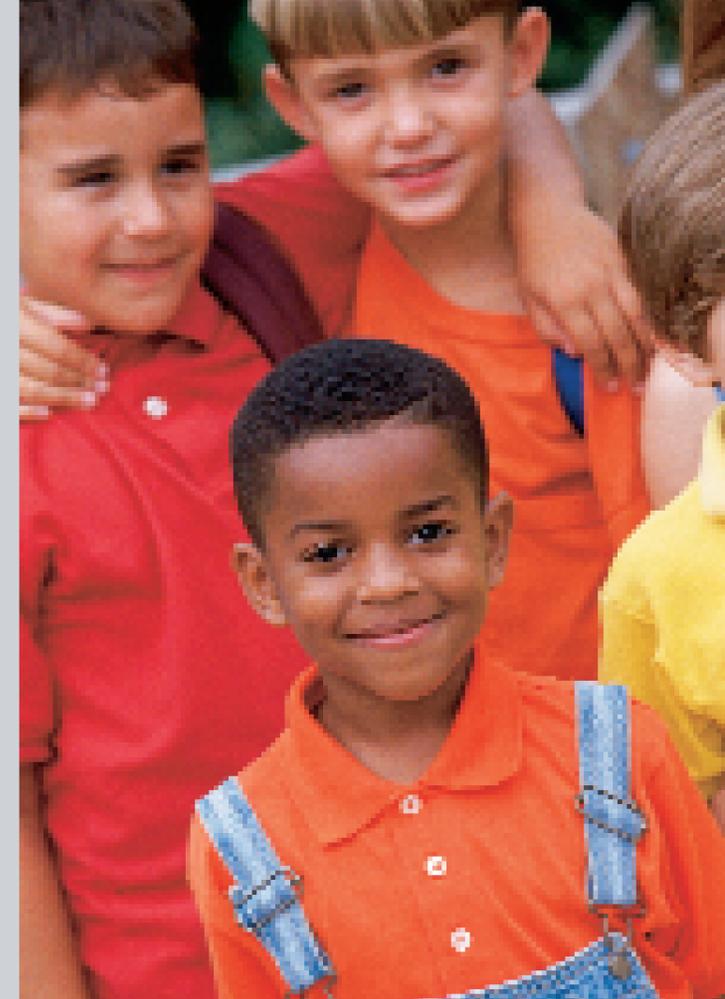
In 1998 a major study on children's use of interactive technologies identified that one in three UK children had used the Internet, with a predicted growth of 1.8 million by 2000 (NOP, 1998). By 2005 the UK was leading Europe in terms of internet access and use among children and young people; three quarters of the surveyed 9-19 age group had accessed the Internet from a computer at home, and 92% had accessed the Internet at school, (Livingstone and Bober, 2005). What is clear is that by 2007 Children in the UK readily inhabit an every-day world of digital and online experiences. A world that is often unfamiliar to adults and a source of contemporary social anxiety.

However, current psychological and educational theoretical work suggests that an understanding of the computer mediated, interactive environment and how children engage with such environments needs to become much more central to contemporary theories of child development, including pedagogical development. Interactive technologies may in reality offer a very real means to improve children's learning and improve cognitive development (Roschelle et al., 2000). They may also provide a means to increase enthusiasm and motivation for learning (Seiter, 2004). The Internet has also been seen as an enabling factor for the child in the development of a sense of community across distances and cultures (Cassel, 2002).

The recent UKCGO (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) survey revealed a plethora of ways in which children and young people in the UK are taking steps towards deepening and diversifying their internet use, many of them gaining sophistication, motivation and skills as they do so. However the findings also identified that many children are not yet taking up the potential of the Internet. The main problem identified was that many young people engage with the internet very passively using it more as ready made sources of entertainment or information rather than as opportunities for critical engagement, user-generated content production or active participation (Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Overall, it seems that the host of new communication technologies may offer a means to profoundly impact on the advancement of children's learning, their sense of self and communication skills, but that the potential of interactive media in terms of impacting positively on young peoples learning, cognitive, social and emotional growth requires further examination. The evaluation presented in this report sought to provide a consideration of that potential through an exploration of the impacts of a system for enabling children, through their schools, to engage in digital storytelling.

Current policy contexts in the UK are creating an impetus for an education system in which teaching and learning are tightly honed towards the individual needs of the child (2020 Review Group, 2007, DfES, 2003). Under the "Every Child Matters" agenda (DfES 2003) schools now have a clear responsibility for children being able to 'enjoy and achieve' at school but also a broader agenda for ensuring that every child can take full advantage of education, be safe, healthy and make a positive contribution. How interactive new technologies might support the attainment of Every Child Matters outcomes are worthy of attention. In addition the twinned concepts of personalised learning and the reflective school form a potentially valuable benchmark against which to evaluate and assess the value of an initiative such as 'Making the News' (MTN).



Framing the Evaluation: The Policy Context

The effective use of new technology within schools is seen as central to the transformation to an education system based on personalised learning. In particular technology is seen to influence 'what, how and why children learn' (2020 Review Group, 2007) and schools need to respond to the challenge created by "far greater access to and reliance on technology as means of conducting daily interaction and transactions" (2020 Review Group, 2007 p8). New technology is seen as enabling a range of highly valuable developments within teaching, learning and the culture of schools, for example:

- A broadening of the range of learning material children are able to access.
- Promoting the development of a broad range of knowledge, skills and understanding.

- Facilitating collaboration with peers.
- Increasing the variety of learning resources, software and communication tools through new media.
- Blurring the distinctions between informal and formal learning – giving children the ability to choose what they learn and when they learn it.
- Increasing motivation, through pace and variety.

However, the precise models of ICT deployment in schools that would maximise any contributions to personalised learning remain somewhat unclear.



The Making the News Project

The Evaluation

This report presents the findings from an independent evaluation of the 'Making the News project' as it functioned within the E2BN' region. Making the News represents a set of simple tools that allow teachers and students to rapidly produce 'news' stories. The idea conceived by E2BN, was to create a one-stop publishing shop for news, where pupils, teachers and the wider 'local' community could access, research, create and share their news over the National Education Network (NEN). The website and technology behind the project has been created by the Centre for New Media (CNM) which is part of the Knowledge Media Institute (KMI), Open University. The Making the News project technology was specifically developed so as to be very easy to use. Pupils and teachers can submit stories via a simple submission form. The stories can be easily annotated with media and other meta-data tags. It also has a Flashblog feature, which enables the user to capture, preview and submit a small video file via a web-cam linked to the computer. Stories can be checked, edited and published within minutes. This makes it a unique, user friendly, free resource, for schools on the National Education Network. The site also contains links to news feeds, research tools and copyright free resources as well as number of activities, many of which have been provided by committed partners who include the Open University, Channel 4, NCJ Media Ltd, and Proquest. It is designed to be used by schools 24 / 7 in any area of the curriculum, at any Key Stage.

The initial focus of the project was on making the news as journalism – along the lines of a school newsletter; involving the development of journalistic techniques such as interviewing, story construction and editing. The MTN stories reproduced in this report can be found at: http://mtn.e2bn.net/mtn_central/

AIMS

The evaluation was designed to inform how to best make use of the 'making the news' project. The central aim of the project was to evaluate the impact, effectiveness and future potential of the 'making the news' concept.

The evaluation of MTN was a small-scale study that adopted a case study approach as the main evaluation component.

Research Objectives

The central tasks of the evaluation team were to provide the following:

1. An identification of current patterns of usage and application.
2. An examination of the facilitators and barriers that would influence the development of an expanded set of applications and usage.
3. An identification of interventions/events that would offer a means to facilitate an expanded set of applications and usage.
4. To review the outcomes of any events or interventions that are initiated during the evaluation period.
5. To recommend areas that require further attention or that required an evaluation with a larger scope than was possible in this study.
6. Throughout particular attention was given to consideration of:
 - a. The impact on teaching and learning.
 - b. The potential of curriculum specific/targeted usage e.g. the showcase model.
 - c. The perspectives and needs of key stakeholders, schools, teachers, parents and young people.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

In order to address the objectives, the project adopted a dynamic case study approach (Yin, 2003) and consequently employed a multi-method approach; involving individual interviews, observation, workshop/focus groups and 'virtual ethnography of the online stories.'

In line with the principles of participatory research the voices of young people were central to the evaluation; children were involved in assisting with designing the questions for the focus groups and advised on issues such as age-appropriate research tools. Groups of young people were also involved in the data analysis process, by being asked to comment on the data concerning the impact and value of MTN from the child's point of view.

Young people also used participation in the research as a means to generate 'news worthy' items for their MTN projects, including turning the tables and interviewing the research team.



FIELDWORK

The following tasks were undertaken as part of the evaluation.

- a. Review of existing usage: patterns of usage and content of MTN were considered at both baseline and at the end of the fieldwork period (18 months).
- b. Facilitation of teacher/schools involvement: Consideration of observation of five training events for teachers.
- c. Stakeholder baseline needs assessment: this was undertaken with a focus on key stakeholders including teachers, and young people, this included interviews with teachers (9) about the potential and value of the system.
- d. Longitudinal case study of an active MTN primary school: A school was selected that had maintained high levels of activity on MTN over a sustained period of over two years. Located with an area of relatively high deprivation the school serves both an area of local authority housing and a static traveller site.

As part of the case study on this school the following data sets were collected:

1. 16 paired interviews with 'non news team' children from year 6 concerning their perspectives on the Making the News stories (32 children from one year group).
2. Four focus groups with story producing 'news' teams (schools years 5 & 6) were undertaken. In order to consider issues of sustainability and to assess continuity of experiences and perceived value focus groups included news teams that had taken over from the previous years group
3. Observation of how children and teachers worked to produce stories on a themed topic (in this case healthy eating) that involved the whole class. This also included four additional focus groups involving all the children from the class.
4. Peer teaching and ability to share skills was observed via a flash meeting™ between the case study school news team and another school with a recently established news team.

DATA ANALYSIS

All the interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Thematic coding was employed and themes were generated inductively from the raw data. All transcripts were coded separately by two researchers, data were categorised into initial and higher codes and repeatedly searched for disconfirming cases as part of the coding refinement process (Boyatzis, 1998). Young people were asked to comment on the 'truth value' of the main themes as they emerged. These co-researchers were drawn from young people at the case study school who had not been previously interviewed. A small group of children in year 6 from another school were also involved in coding the data and assessing the stories produced.

RESEARCH ETHICS

The study had approval from the University ethics committee. All the names of children used in this report have been changed.



Benefits of MTN: A Case Study of Innovation

The following sections are concerned with the case study of a primary school and the teachers, pupils and parents engagement with MTN (see methods section for a detailed description of the case study site). The school operates MTN primarily on a news team basis, with a core of about 8-12 children. Children opt to join the team as part of a school club that runs during lunch times. Pupils may work on stories and undertake related tasks such as interviews for a story outside of the club lunch times. The story production process is also predominately child-led, with the majority of story ideas being generated by the children, although teaching staff have suggested topics for the teams and some themed class based work was also undertaken.

The school supports the team with resources such as iPods to undertake recorded interviews, use of a digital camera and video and access to a computer space. A teacher moderates the news team stories. Other teachers are also supportive through encouraging work on stories. There have also been whole class initiatives, whereby a larger group of children are encouraged to become involved through group based story production. School wide familiarity with the stories produced on MTN is encouraged through showing the stories in class and assembly times. Parents are also made aware of MTN through usual school communication routes, such as the school newsletter.

The case study school was one of 11 schools that had actively published a number of stories (over 20). Moreover, it was one of a minority (5) that had maintained this level over a sustained period

of 18 months – two years. Consequently, this school was adopted as a case study because it was likely to represent an example of both extensive and successful use of MTN, thereby providing an in-depth exploration of the maximum impact of MTN within a school and potential modelling of the key components that enabled success.

IMPACTS ON LEARNING: MOTIVATED LEARNERS

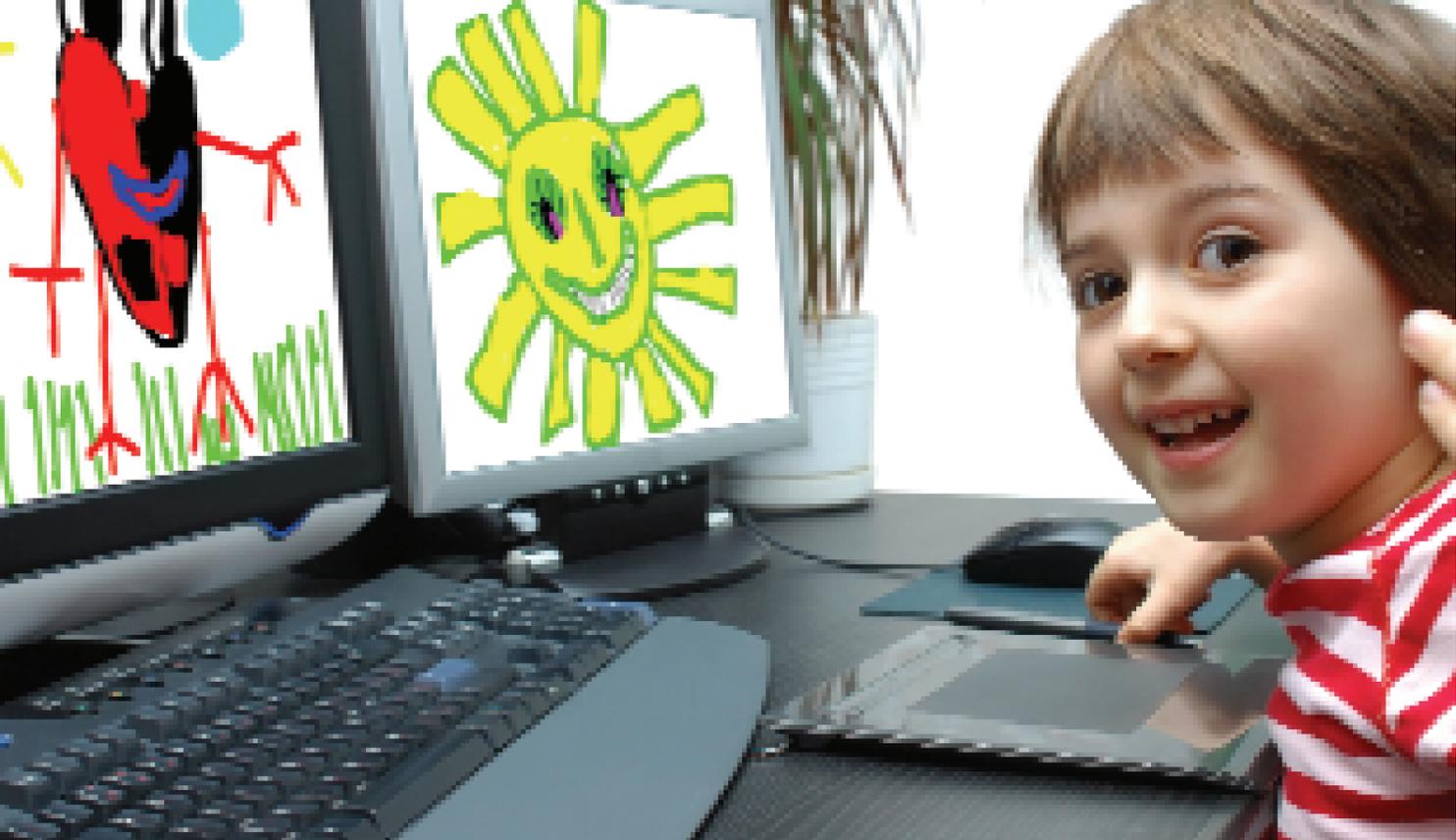
Interviewer: does it feel like schoolwork?

No! (multiple cries from group)

Evie: It's good fun!

Jack: You're having fun!





Creating and shaping text forms a key part of the National primary framework for literacy and mathematics set by the DFES.

Consequently, encouraging positive attitudes towards writing among children are likely to form part of effective teaching and learning strategies in relation to literacy.

From the perspective of the children the process of constructing a finished text for an online medium had considerable advantages over their usual experience of classroom based writing. For a child whose writing and presentation skills were not strong, being able to produce a story that looked well presented was a potential boost to confidence and demonstrated that writing could be rewarding:

Ash: I liked not having to write it on paper, it looks neater so my work looks nicer and no one was telling me, 'that is all messy'. I liked doing the writing for it and I don't like doing that sort of thing stories and stuff in class.

Improved presentation and the ability to make the piece interesting through the inclusion of other media was seen by the children as a means to ensure their engagement with the project. The children also saw these additional components such as interviews as means of improving the overall quality of the finished product.

Interviewer: So, tell me what you mean when it is different from the normal writing you do?

Ruby: Because if you take a piece of writing and it's like kind of boring, scruffy.

Lewis: And it's like no pictures on it or anything and it's just boring.

Angela: How can you put an interview in your book?

Children in the focus groups were found to be committed to developing and improving their writing skills as part of the MTN story production process. The children across all the groups consistently expressed an understanding of the need to ensure that their writing was engaging for their audience.

Sinead: You think more about how to make it interesting so that it is interesting for people to look at it. Making the writing short and clear.

The different groups also demonstrated a very clear view of the elements that would make a weak story or presentation.

Weaknesses in style, grammar, punctuation and the need for visually interesting presentation were all understood and discussed critically by the children.

Interviewer: Ok so tell me what makes a poor story?

Peter: If they always have 'and,'and,'and' and no full stops and no capital letters

Paul: Not many pictures and just not many interviews

Angela: And just boring and like not good headlines

Peter: And you keep writing 'she did this', 'she did that', 'she needed this' 'he did that'

Self directed learning was a demonstrable feature of the children's interaction with MTN, as children (across the different news teams) reported that they actively searched and read stories from other schools, as a means to develop and improve their work. Children

also reported that they regularly read postings from other schools during their leisure time at home. The full character of home based engagement with MTN was interestingly, not facilitated by their teachers who until the research uncovered the behaviour were largely unaware that the children were 'getting tips' from elsewhere. This potential of MTN to motivate children to become self-directed learners represents a potentially significant impact, particularly if such enthusiastic responsibility for learning can be maintained when the children transfer to secondary level.

Interviewer: Do all of you look at stories from other schools?

Yeah (several voices)

Lewis: Check out the competition!

Jack: And if you actually look at other people's stories, you can actually learn things, because they would use describing words that we had never used before or taking very still photos and sometimes they show us what they're doing so we can actually learn off them.

Molly: I like looking for good describing words, for like what they're writing. I look on the Internet at home and see what other stories from other places are on there. See what words they have used that are better than the ones we had.

From the perspective of the child, there seemed to be distinctly positive differences between creating a text as part of MTN and more traditionally based, classroom approaches to writing. Perhaps, the potentially the most interesting finding is the way that participation in MTN appeared to have a transformational effect on the child's relationship to learning, by facilitating the children to be motivated self-directed learners. The generalisability of such a transformational impact and how to sustain and promote this apparent effect of participation in MTN is worthy of consideration in future studies.

PERSONALISED LEARNING

Teaching staff reported that MTN functioned as a valuable strategy for attracting and holding the attention of pupils who may be disengaged from more standard approaches to literacy teaching. By personalising the approach to each child's involvement, staff could start with a skill such as digital photography, and then the process of MTN story production could lead the child into the range of skills, including creating texts.

It has enabled us to work with pupils who might have been perhaps disinterested, who would never write

anything in the classroom if they didn't have to. ... They may have come to it with a flair for taking the pictures or wanting to do interviews, but then pretty soon realised that they wanted to do the whole thing. (Teacher)

The fact that it was possible to work flexibly with any topic or theme, or undertake the work with groups or individuals enabled the teachers to work in a very pupil centred way. The absence of a rigid model or set framework for employing MTN in the classroom was also valued by teachers as a resource, that enabled them to adjust their teaching strategies in order to be responsive to the diversity of pupils needs within the group.

It's very flexibility allows us to respond to the different needs within a group and keep them all focused.

(Teacher)

The enhancement of ICT skills such as being able to publish online was clearly addressed by MTN, however children also learnt how to appropriately use and employ a host of other technologies and software such as videos, digital cameras and PowerPoint. The acquisition of new skills was something that all groups of children talked about and children clearly valued exploring the use of a range of digital technologies. In addition they also discussed how they valued being able to improve their communication skills, through for example learning how to do effective interviews and presentations, as the following focus group discussion illustrates:

Ruby: We have shown lots how to do videos, interviews; the whole class knows how to make a film now.

Paula: How to do a good interview

Molly: You get to interview people that you didn't know about like before, what they think about things

COLLABORATIVE WORKING

Recent international reports have identified that the levels of emotional distress (such as caused by bullying or social and educational performance) in UK school aged children are among the highest of all developed countries in the world (Currie et al., 2004, Unicef, 2007). In addition, children's perceptions of the support available to them from educators, peers and other adults in the community are ranked the lowest of the 21 OECD countries. These reports also highlighted that UK children felt that their peers as less likely to be 'kind and helpful' than comparable children in any other OECD country. Consequently, identifying ways to improve the self esteem of young people and promote collaboration and supportive peer relationships are clearly important issues for the UK school aged population. The following

sections concerned with collaborative working and self-esteem explore the aspects of MTN that may offer schools an additional tool in their repertoire to support positive peer relations and promote emotional well-being.



The 'news team' concept requires the children to work collaboratively in order to complete a finished story; they not only have to construct text, supporting material such as interviews, videos and photographs but also work collaboratively to assemble the story and be able to edit each others reports. Children reported that although they did find team working challenging, they also valued the 'team spirit' engendered by producing a story.

Interviewer: Is it hard some times to work together?
Becca: Yeah it is tricky, it's hard because if you're with the people you don't like. You're going to have arguments, if you have to edit their stories, you have to think of good things to say, but basically we're altogether and we really enjoy it.

Children were able to readily suggest that achievements and hobbies of other students could be a focus of a story idea, as the following discussion from a paired interview illustrates:

Interviewer: So why did you choose to do the story?
Liam: Peter persuaded me to do it, I didn't think anyone would care, but Peter said they would so I did it.
Peter: well I thought it is really unusual for children to keep chickens and every-one would be really interested.

Consequently, the flexibility offered by the MTN story production process and the child-led nature of the news team approach also appeared to allow children to be encouraging and supportive of fellow peers activities and achievements. Although the ability of an initiative such as MTN to facilitate supportive peers relations is

likely to be heavily intertwined with the existing school culture, it does seem that MTN may offer teachers an additional tool to enhance the character of peer relationships within a school. Teachers also commented that MTN provided a vehicle for valuing the achievements or skills of pupils that did not readily fit with existing school merit or educational reward systems.

It has been really useful for demonstrating the range of abilities and talents that a child has and celebrating those. It can make a child who perhaps may or may not be doing well in usual academic achievement but who has something else about them that is special. That can mean that they go on from here a little more confident, a little more self-assured. (Teacher)



SELF-ESTEEM: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CHILD
 The concept of engaging with an audience and the perceived permanency of the story project was something that strongly appealed to the students. The sense that they were producing a valuable and worthwhile product, that could be read widely, was an additional motivating factor in the children committing to working on stories.

Interviewer: Tell me why you feel writing for MTN is different to other writing that you do?
Stephen: You feel important
Interviewer: Important?
Ash: And if you've got a piece of paper you might just put it in your book and then it might get crunched up and if it's on the internet it will always be there.
Stephen: Yeah they're for other people to see

Publication on the Internet was perceived as a high status activity, with equal status in the view of the children, to formal traditional publishing routes, such as newspaper articles or books. Moreover the very process of publishing a story online that could be read worldwide was perceived as a boost to the children's feelings of self worth. The 'wow' or 'celebrity factor' created by online publishing may have a valuable influence in terms of facilitating young peoples engagement with writing:



Jack: When you see your story up there on line you think, I did that, wow!
Molly: My dad was in the local paper and now I am on the Internet!

The child-led character of the topic choice for stories was also found to have positive outcomes for the children and teaching staff. Teaching staff felt that commitment from children to participating in MTN increased directly in proportion to how much the children were encouraged to take forward their own topics and interests. The teachers then acted as facilitator and moderators rather than being directors of the project. This child-led aspect of the MTN project was felt by teaching staff to release a considerable amount of creativity.

It seems that the more we let the children run with, the more it expands and moves up a dimension. They come up with idea and topics that we would never have thought of. In the beginning we did much more of suggesting issues. But it seems the more we let them run it, the more it grows in ways we wouldn't have imagined. They do understand the boundaries and we do talk about that sometimes some stories aren't quite appropriate, but others you have to say yes you can run with that because it shows them that doing this kind of work is also fun. (Teacher)

As noted at the start of this report, being part of MTN was felt to be a distinctly different activity to 'usual' school activity. The fun

element was a core aspect of the children's positive categorisation of MTN. Children enjoyed immensely writing more informal comedy pieces about amusing events that happened at their school and all children talked animatedly about such stories. This type of story did perhaps present a less than perfect formal image of the school, but was valued by the children because the teaching staff had allowed them to have the space to produce such work. Potentially reinforcing a positive relationship between teaching staff and pupils.



The children reported that the stories they liked the best were ones that featured activities of their peers, school or community. Stories that were valued by the children did not necessarily equate with high profile 'showcase events' such as awards given to the school, but instead children valued the simple documenting of every day happenings.



Interviewer: What's your favourite story?

Emma: Flour girl

Evie: Mines flour girl too

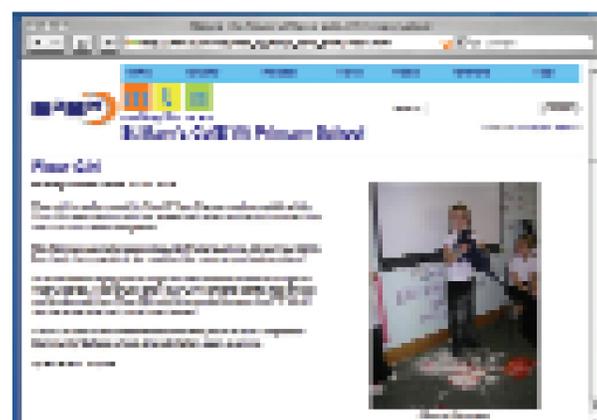
Paul: Yeah that was so funny

Evie: Flour girl was all about Charlotte, she went like that and flour just popped all over her and she had to brush herself down but it wouldn't come off

Emma: It was flour

Emma: And Elliot and Jack had to Hoover it up and we got like pictures of Jack hoovering it up with Elliot

Paul: Elliot saves the day!



MTN enabled the children to perceive aspects of their school, their lives and community as in effect 'news worthy' and consequently to be of value. Children reported that they liked being able to display

pride in their school and found this aspect of MTN personally fulfilling, as the following exchange illustrates:

Jane: The good thing is that is about us, about our school, what is going on here and our environment, the things we do,

Amy: Personal stuff about us

Interviewer: Can you think of an example?

Amber: Garden club. Once you've done something like that you feel proud that you've helped people

Stephen: You feel proud that you've done it and then other people can see it as well and they can see it's a good school.

One of the areas that the interviews explored with the children was, what it felt like to be the subject of a story or to have the increased visibility that participation in MTN inevitably brings.

Although on occasion the children did find being written about or even every-one in the school seeing their story a little challenging, overall the children viewed both the roles of reporter and interviewee in a positive light.

Lenny: When we do it in assembly, we don't get told that our story's going on to assembly so if you've been interviewed then we feel really embarrassed for everyone to listen but then at the end you feel really proud for every-one to know that you've done one.

Ethical sensitivity and e-safety were also discussed with the MTN news teams. The children were knowledgeable about the ethical rules they needed to follow and had an awareness of how to approach online publishing in a way that protected their safety.

Interviewer: Okay what are the rules about making a story?

Amy: You have to have some-ones permission to interview and write about them, they have to say OK

Stephen: And you should never put the person's name in a picture of them

Jane: No

They might not want their name on and someone might come and get them.

MTN appeared to impact positively on children's sense of well-being in school, giving them both a positive sense of accomplishment and personal significance. MTN also appeared to support children in portraying positive attitudes towards the school as well as their own and their peers achievements.

CHILD CENTRED DEBATING: MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

Children also highlighted that presenting stories about the issues that concerned them was an important aspect of MTN story production. Children valued being able to positively contribute to issues that they felt were of relevance and importance to other young people, producing a MTN story that 'might be of help' was a common feature in the children's accounts of why participating in the MTN team was worthwhile, as the following account concerning bullying illustrates:

Joe: The big conversation story was good because it showed everyone that this is really important and hopefully that may help others who are being bullied to see that story and know that we all think it is important too.



MTN also functioned as a vehicle for the children to express their views and opinions, and on occasion the children recognised that MTN gave them a means to explore topics of concern or interest that the surrounding adult world might not have addressed.

Liam: No- one asks us what we think about bird flu but it's on all the time and so I thought I'd do it.

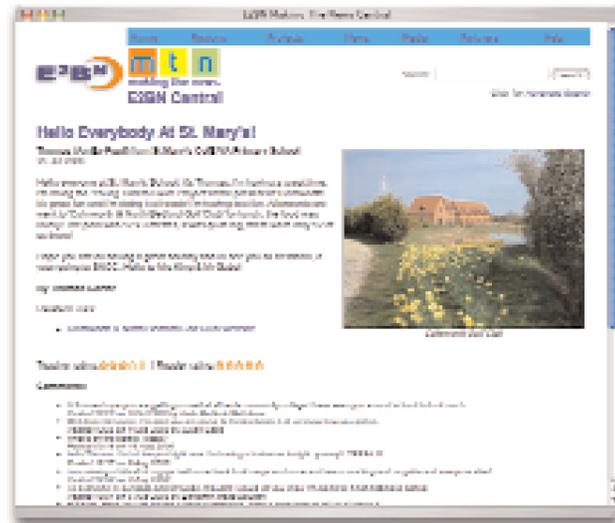
The value of the child-led topic choice also emerged in the themed project the children undertook, relating to healthy eating. This was a project that the whole year worked on in groups in order to produce a MTN story about 'food and healthy eating'. During the interviews the children revealed that the move towards healthy eating and 'fruit only' breaks in school was not particularly popular with the students. Similarly health promotion research has also revealed that children do actively resist adult centred approaches that promote healthy eating because it will be of benefit to their long term health. Children it seems would rather have the sweets and crisps now, than have a healthy heart in the future (Ross, 1995). However, through working on the healthy eating themed topic, children revealed that they were much more committed to healthy eating when they explored it from an environmental point of view, both internationally in terms of fair trade and global warming and locally as 'fruit breaks' reduced the litter in the playground.



Through functioning as a means to access the child's perspective MTN provided a way that an effective approach to the promotion of healthy food choices might be developed. It is also likely that online storytelling might be applied further to other aspects of the healthy schools agenda.

A feature that emerged as the first news team group transferred to secondary school was that many of the news team members not only continued to view postings, but also they continued to post stories. Interestingly, children used the comments section attached

to a story as a means to keep in touch with each other over the summer break (see 'Hello Everybody' story). MTN became for these young people a resource to maintain connections with established friends and the comfortable environment of the primary school as they moved to secondary school. Potentially MTN functioned to help the children overcome the feelings of loss that may surround the transition to secondary school (Measor and Woods 1984).



EXTENDING THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS

Contemporary UK Policy and educational research stress that the involvement of parents is a key feature in the educational success of children. However in practice parental involvement is often difficult to achieve, with many traditional parent-school communication strategies (such as parent evenings) failing to include parents from the most disadvantaged communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

From the perspective of the children, parental interest in their stories was high, with parents and children actively reading the stories together:

Alison: When I came back from the conference (E2BN conference presenting MTN) in year 5 I told my mum and she went straight onto the computer and we're all like looking at the pictures and stories of us, and we looked at them all, so she knew what we were doing.

One example of parents viewing stories is illustrated in figure 1. During May the year group had a residential week away and were posting stories about their activities regularly via mobile phone

links, the high number of hits during this time suggests that for parents the MTN stories became a popular means of connecting with their children's experiences.

Overall MTN appears to offer positive impacts on young peoples sense of personal achievement through enabling parents to access the children's work.

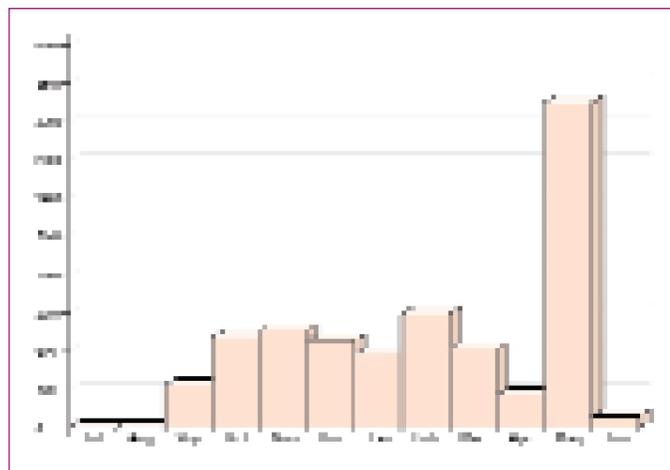
Sarah: My Mum and Dad are quite proud of me when I show them all my stories when I get home from school and things.

An interesting aspect of parental viewing is that some families who did not have access to the internet from home were prepared to travel to the local library to access the stories.

Molly: We don't have a computer so we can't look at home my parents go into the library and look at them.

Parental involvement did however remain at the passive level of simply viewing the stories. The potential value and even the possibility of further engaging parents and families through either being the subject of a story project, or jointly authoring with their children, remains to be attempted. Although it seems that as a medium to engage parents in their children's life at school, MTN may be fertile ground on which to develop parental involvement strategies.

Figure 1



Number of times full details have been viewed for the stories posted in a given month



ADDED VALUE FOR THE SCHOOL

From the perspective of the school MTN also functioned as a strategic resource, serving as an accessible and lively means to document the work of the children.

Teacher: A year ago if we had an inspection we would have had folders and a photo album, which is a very partial account of the activity of the school. Now through 'Making The News' we have this fully documented record, that not only demonstrates our activity, but really displays the work of the children and shows what they are capable of doing.

MTN was felt by teachers to provide a relatively easy means to demonstrate to the external world the distinctive character of the school and the nature of activity within the school. As a record of the life of a school MTN offers a potential tool that might aid schools with inspection processes or accreditation schemes such as the healthy schools agenda.





Using MTN: Models of Practice

Previous sections of this report explored the impact of MTN in a high user school and provided an account of the predominantly positive benefits of such usage. The next section will provide an overview of the range of models schools adopted and then identify some of the features that appear to support higher and continued usage.

At the start of the evaluation (summer 2005) participation by E2BN region schools in MTN had not been extensive, however by the end of the evaluation period 50 schools in the E2BN region had posted stories, with some other single events and organisations also posting stories (11 events/organisations)*.

Although there were some participating secondary schools on the 'actively contributing list of schools' (8) the overwhelming majority of schools who had participated were primary/junior or middle schools (39)*. In the main it appeared that years 5-6 were the most actively involved ages of children.

Over the period of the evaluation (June 2005 – February 2007) several distinctive patterns of usage emerged. Although the small sample size inherent to the current evaluation does create problems in terms of generalising about the overall effectiveness of the models of usage, patterns that appeared to promote high and sustained use over time did emerge.

TEACHER-AUTHORED

Early content from schools on the MTN site consisted of single one off postings or a higher number of stories that were all teacher-authored stories. In the latter case, it was often the sole 'enthusiastic individual teacher' within a school that was posting news stories. These stories were predominantly well-crafted pieces about high profile 'news worthy' events. A typical example was one primary school that posted an imaginative and creative video about their work towards a healthy schools week. An obvious follow-up would have been a 'report' after the event. However there were no subsequent postings from this school despite a time lapse of several months. At the end of the evaluation 29 schools overall had posted in total only between 1-5 stories each and had not posted any further stories for a considerable period of time (in some cases over a year)*.

Some schools had very active teacher authors, who over a sustained period posted a high number of stories (for example, over 53 stories in one case and 33 stories in another), documenting a range of activities within the school. However in all cases these schools had at the end of the evaluation ceased posting stories for some time (9 months – 1 year). It is likely that a model of usage that is dependent upon one champion although successful in documenting the work of the school and pupils in the short term is unsustainable in the longer term, particularly if the individual teacher moves on from the school.

SINGLE TOPIC PROJECTS

A couple of schools engaged with MTN via a themed project or single event based work. These schools all (between 20-39 stories) produced a high number of stories relating to the project work. However in all cases there were no further projects undertaken.

NEWS TEAM MODEL

Nine schools adopted a version of the 'news team' with all stories being authored by students at the schools. Five schools were both producing a high volume of stories, 382 stories at evaluation end point out of a total of 793 (48% of stories from schools posted on the E2BN region site) and also appearing to sustain their high level use over time. A couple of schools had at the end of the evaluation period also recently adopted a child led 'news team approach'. Their participation was in such early stages it was not possible to comment on the longer-term sustainability of their approach. Two schools operating a news team model had been actively contributing for over a calendar year with one-year group (in both cases year 6), but had appeared to cease all usage at the end of the school year and had not commenced posting stories again in September, with the start of the new school year. This may illustrate the need for schools to consider succession planning after an active MTN year group transfers to secondary school.

Strategies that encompassed peer learning and involving young people in such succession planning could also provide valuable learning experiences for children involved in MTN. The case study school had put in place 'succession strategies'. Children from the existing year 6 team were involved in peer teaching of the year five group. The enthusiasm of the existing news team was found to be a contributing factor in encouraging younger children to participate.

Interviewer: Why did you become a member of the news team?

Robbie: My brother said 'do it! It's a really good thing to do and you get to do lots of interesting things.

Rhiannon: Yes that's the same, why I did it my friend in year 6 said the same, you feel special. (Year Five News Team)

EXPLORATION OF SINGLE POSTING SCHOOLS

As already noted almost half of schools listed as users of MTN were effectively non-users by virtue of the fact that they had only posted 1-5 stories. The small-scale nature of the evaluation did not allow for a detailed in-depth survey of non-users/low users of MTN. Existing research on virtual communities indicates that there

are likely to be several main explanations for low level of engagement with any new information technology. Moreover, interviews with staff on MTN training courses and interviews with staff in low user schools highlighted a number of potential explanations for low usage.

User friendly?: One concern with any new technology is that the interface may be too difficult for the new user. Feedback from staff at the training days strongly indicated that teaching staff found the actual technology to be relatively user-friendly. Although some participants did state that additional 'reminder' instructions on the website for use would be helpful.

The added value is unclear – 'it doesn't meet a need': If an end user community fails to immediately see the value of using a new technology, then uptake will be low. Use of new technology is intricately bound up with problem solving, if it is easy to see how a new technology meets a previously identified need then it will be used. It maybe, that from the perspective of some teachers they did not readily see how the MTN project would meet a teaching and learning need. Interviews with some teachers during training sessions on MTN tended to support this conclusion:

I just never saw how it could be used to enhance teaching and learning (teacher on MTN training session)
I thought this is too difficult for children to use and I don't see how we could apply it in the classroom (teacher on MTN training session)

Essentially teachers need to be convinced that 'MTN' would enable them to add value to the classroom experience and address a current 'gap' in their ability to deliver key teaching and learning objectives.

The concept may also have felt too broad leaving teachers without a clear vision of how to apply the concept in a classroom environment. Although plenty of ideas were given to them during the training sessions this may have been insufficient to generate usage once potential participants were back on their 'home turf' and dealing with competing pressures.

Initiatives by the design and consultancy team were put in place to assist with the process of supporting teachers to use MTN and to see the vision of the system, i.e. examples and templates that were clearly linked with a number of diverse areas of the curriculum were developed and added to the website. These were aimed to encourage a novice to begin to use the project, but also to address specific subject areas and whole school issues, such as healthy school initiatives. Incentives and rewards for active participation



Recommendations

were also put in place with a competition for high quality and innovative stories, hosted at a national teaching conference. How to market MTN further through the extension of such strategies, particularly to secondary schools is an area for future development.

MODELLING EFFECTIVE USE

Drawing on the review of usage and the in-depth case study analysis a number of characteristics appear to be conducive to high levels and sustained usage of MTN, that potentially offer positive impacts on teaching, learning and the broader 'Every Child Matters' agenda for schools. Essentially grounded in a child-led 'news team approach' the key characteristics of an effective model of MTN usage are mapped out below.

These core areas fall into 6 main categories:

- 1. Child-led:** At the heart of the model is a mechanism that enables the creativity and energy of the children to be harnessed. Facilitating leadership of MTN by students appears to be key to developing and sustaining commitment from the children. In order to achieve the reported impacts on learning and self-esteem found in the case study site, students need to be facilitated to initiate, create and lead on the MTN story production process. Fundamentally, if the process is too prescribed and adult directed, the project appears to lack sustainability.
- 2. The 'fun' factor:** Related to the point above the sustained commitment of students is reinforced by schools and teachers encouraging experimentation and enabling topics that are of

concern to young people to dominate. Schools and teachers in order to encourage participation need to be not overly concerned with producing a 'perfect, high profile' story from an adult perspective, but instead view online publishing as a learning process for the students.

- 3. Resource support:** Resource input needed from schools to support MTN were not high, but computer availability and digital recording equipment are core resource commitments. An accessible space for MTN that children can use flexibly, for example on different days, was also important for story generation.
- 4. Teacher facilitation:** Having an identified teacher or team that provided monitoring, advice and moderation were important to the functioning to MTN and to ensure e-safety.
- 5. Part of the school culture:** Commitment to the MTN project needed to be embedded into the life and culture of the school, for example, by teaching staff drawing upon stories as a resource in classes and highlighting stories in assemblies. The promotion of external story use by informing parents of stories (through school communication strategies) is also key to reinforcing MTN.
- 6. Sustainability planning:** Succession planning for the next generation of students is key to the sustainability of the MTN project. Moreover harnessing peer-teaching approaches may have other benefits in terms of student leadership development.

DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has highlighted a number of areas that warrant further exploration in order to understand and demonstrate the full potential of MTN. This small-scale evaluation was only focused on a case study analysis within one region and consequently sets an agenda for further more systematic examination of the impact of online publishing projects such as MTN.

Additional developments are also likely to be needed to extend the usage of the MTN project and these also outlined below.

systematic consideration of the following is recommended

1. How interactive online publishing technologies might support the attainment of Every Child Matters outcomes including improving the self-esteem of young people.
2. The generalisability of the transformational impact on learning and how to sustain and promote this apparent effect of participation in MTN.
3. Detailed consideration of how secondary schools may be more actively engaged in the MTN project.
4. How to ensure and promote e-safety
5. How to engage the participation of parents and the broader community in the MTN project.

MARKETING OF THE PROJECT REQUIRES DEVELOPMENT

There needs to be investment in communications and support for new users and existing users. It may be worthwhile to consider how to encourage initial contribution and further contribution separately. Initial contributions need to be facilitated by ease of access and use to both ideas for usage and instructions. Schools nationally need to be made more aware of the existence of the project, promoting competitions and awards for participation may assist with this process.

Re-messaging could also be improved to existing participants. Initial postings require feedback e.g. noting that the page has been looked at, or suggesting that they do a follow-up.

All participants need to be made aware of strategies and models of implementation that promote the most successful outcomes.

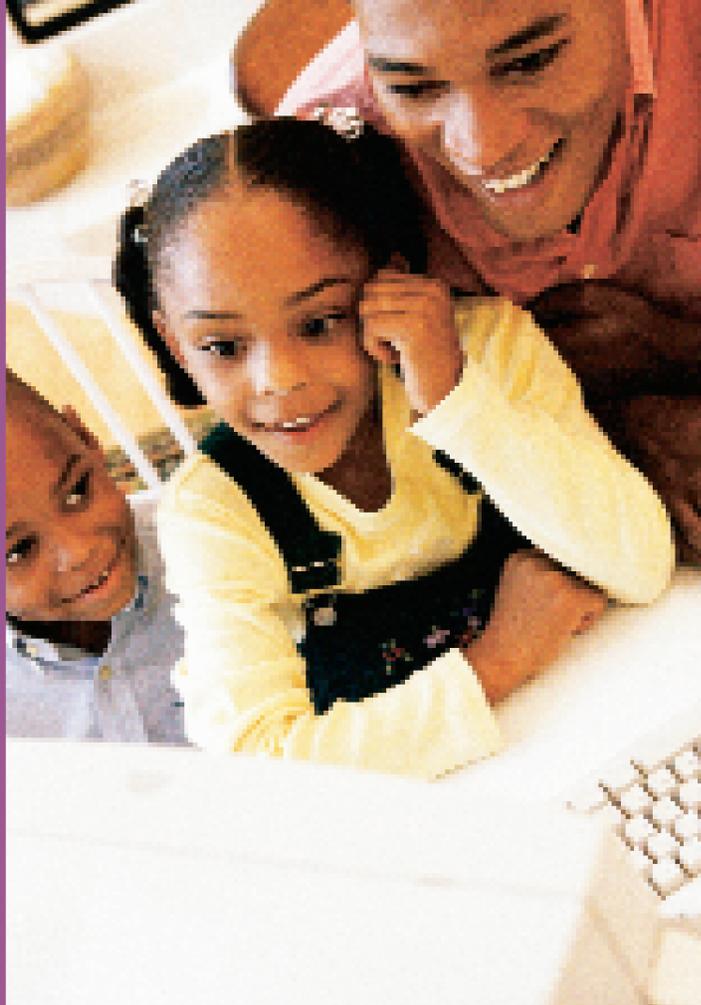
accessibility requires further attention

The website is under current re-design. However accessibility in terms of teaching staff, students and parents being able to find and search for their local stories requires attention.

THE RSS TECHNOLOGY NEEDS TO BE EXTENDED

MTN should disaggregate feeds all the way down to the level of the child; ideally each student should have their own "feed". Student feeds should be aggregated into a class feed; class feeds should aggregate up to year feeds; and so on up. Users should be able to mix sources and topics to find activity and best practice in all schools.

The most effective way to optimise learning is to actively engage students in constructing knowledge, when this occurs students have a sufficiently refined understanding to apply their learning in a wide range of contexts (Branford et al., 1999). Active knowledge construction occurs when students cease to be passive recipients of textual or lecture based information and instead construct knowledge through a 'combination of experience, interpretations and structured interactions with peers and teachers' (Roschelle et al., 2000).



Conclusions: MTN Harnessing Technology for Learning

New ICT's may offer a way of closing the 'learning gap' and enabling students to have a much more dynamic experience of teaching and learning, so that students are engaged in constructing knowledge. The findings of this evaluation illustrate the ways that 'Making the News' can offer an e-safe environment for teachers and students to collaboratively create a positive impact on learning. The ability of systems such as MTN to harness the potential of new technology and have a transformational effect on learning is also highly dependent on a supportive child-centred model being embedded into the culture of the school.



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