Teaching and learning in a digital world
What we heard in June, 2010

BACKGROUND

On June 10, 2010, the Ministry of Education held roundtable sessions on teaching and learning in a digital world. More roundtable sessions and discussions with our education partners and stakeholders will be organized for early 2011. These sessions will build upon what we heard in June. The plan will be designed to take advantage, where possible, of existing forums and committees for working collaboratively with our key stakeholders, such as the Partnership Table, the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) and the Ontario Association of Deans of Education.

The ministry’s plans are also being informed by participation in national and international policy dialogues, ministry-commissioned policy research on skills, technology and learning in selected international jurisdictions, and, a scan of local board policies and practices conducted this past summer in partnership with CODE and Ontario’s 72 district school boards.

The ministry’s goal is to determine with the sector if there is agreement on a small set of high-impact themes for action at both the provincial and local levels, including potential local innovation pilot projects in the future. The prime consideration will be those actions that would make further significant contribution toward achieving Ontario’s core education priorities and assuring the continued strength of our publicly funded education system as one of the best in the world.

The ministry is leading this sector-wide collaboration at the request of Ontario education leaders, including CODE and the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association OPCSBA. We heard the message that now is the time for Ontario educators to engage in a dialogue on this important and strategic topic.

To kick-start the process, the ministry invited thirty-two educators and students from across the province to spend the morning or afternoon of June 10th sharing their expertise and views on the topic with each other, Deputy Minister Kevin Costante and assistant deputy ministers Grant Clarke and Barry Pervin. The group discussions were facilitated by a team from Deloitte Canada and focussed on three questions:

- Why is it important for Ontario’s Early Learning to Grade 12 sector to consider the topic of teaching and learning in a digital world at this time?
- Why do you think that it is making or will make a difference to the core priorities of increasing student achievement; closing the gap and/or improving public confidence in publicly-funded education?
- What should or could happen at a system, school and/or classroom level?

The discussions were impressive, passionate and visionary while mindful of practical considerations. Participants were generous in sharing their expertise and insights. We heard from elementary and secondary teachers (new and experienced, English- and French-language), secondary and postsecondary students, superintendents, principals, vice-principals, board curriculum and technology staff, directors of education (public, catholic and French-language district school boards), university faculty and representatives from education publishing.

Across these two expert roundtable groups, there was a shared sense of urgency about the need for our education sector to give priority to this topic now, with strong links from the outset to the postsecondary education and training sectors. The following ten notional themes have emerged from the June discussions:

- Vision, guidelines and expectations
- Learning: How does it help and what do kids need to learn?
- Privacy, rules of use and digital citizenship
- Teaching practice and teacher preparation
- Assessment
- Digital media and content
- Access and equity
- Infrastructure
- Innovation
- Community involvement.

These early themes will help define the focus of the 2011 discussions, in combination with what the ministry is learning from research and dialogue with representatives from other jurisdictions. Highlights of what we heard at the June 10th expert roundtables are summarized below.

VISION, GUIDELINES AND EXPECTATIONS

Roundtable participants told us that teaching and learning in a digital world is as much about leading and supporting a culture change in schools as it is about sharing best instructional practices that engage and prepare learners for the knowledge society and digital global economy. It is not about the technology, per se, although technology certainly is part of the picture. Important questions to reflect upon at every level of the system include, are we harvesting technology to best achieve our shared mission and vision for student success? How would we know?

In the view of roundtable participants on June 10th, now is the time for Ontario educators and leaders to invest effort in working toward a common vision for our system as a whole where ultimately educators, administrators and learners alike, make wise use of instructional technology, including emerging digital technology, as a natural part of learning and teaching.

- The rest of the world is moving past us. Ontario has no option or others will take over the lead.
- We use the new tools the same way we use the old tools – this costs a lot of money and doesn’t leverage the technology.
LEARNING: HOW DOES IT HELP AND WHAT DO KIDS NEED TO LEARN?

We heard extensively about teachers’ personal visions and rationales for using digital technology and resources in their instructional practice. We heard the hopes and wishes of our student participants for how technology might be better harnessed for learning and living in a digital economy and global community.

Many participants shared research references and their direct experiences with how new technologies are having an impact on their own teaching, learning and leadership practices. Prominent among the rich diversity of ideas we heard include the enabling and transformational role of technology in: personalizing learning; differentiating instruction; multi-levelled and multi-layered learning; curriculum relevance in all subjects and grades; developing knowledge, skills and competencies for the 21st century; in fostering creativity, collaboration and community; in promoting student engagement and retention; and, in closing the gap in student achievement.

- Technology tools could allow us to reach each and every student and support differentiated instruction.
- Creativity, communication—give students the tools they need to be digital citizens.
- Technology does make the difference for some learners with the greatest needs.
- Personalization – for both students and teachers but also working together in community.
- Bottom line, IT has to empower learning and teaching and this drives what we are doing.

PRIVACY, RULES OF USE AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Roundtable participants were in agreement that this theme applied to teachers and students alike, and that both would benefit from more guidelines around online safety and ethical behaviour.

- We are still grappling with this as a society.
- Boundaries and guidelines are needed, e.g., e-mail communication, Facebook.

TEACHING PRACTICE AND TEACHER PREPARATION

We heard excitement as participants spoke with pride about the pockets of innovation that already exist in some Ontario classrooms, schools, boards and faculties of education. As one participant remarked, “There are scattered pockets of great practices in classrooms.” Others agreed that the challenge is how to build this same capacity across the system.

- How teachers engage students is key.
- The teacher’s role needs to move from keeper of the knowledge to facilitator of student learning.
- We aren’t moving forward as a teaching profession—the percentage is small.

ASSESSMENT

The topic of assessment within the context of teaching and learning in a digital world evoked animated and philosophical discussions about a shared vision for education and meaningful measures of student success. Both groups shared a view that measurement should encompass more than outcomes of academic achievement. Views on other aspects of assessment were quite divergent. Some participants offered very specific ideas for changing assessment policy and practice. The ministry was reminded about how important it is to communicate the benefits of any change to parents, teachers and the broader public.

- Measuring techniques need to catch up, i.e., can’t measure 21st century skills with 19th century measuring tools.
- Need to re-think assessment to allow other measures of success.

DIGITAL MEDIA AND CONTENT

Participants were in agreement that the role of digital media and content must increase in K-to-12 teaching and learning.

- Life is moving in a direction influenced by IT and media.
- We absolutely have to move to digital textbooks...it is so much easier to bring a math book home on CD than a book.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure and technology considerations were part of the conversations in both roundtables. However, the central focus is on teaching and learning, not technology.

Participants were enthusiastic in sharing specific innovation examples, such as local efforts to adapt and enable learning environments with mobile technology and board-wide multi-year approaches to installing wireless networks in every school. They were equally passionate and vocal, in speaking to their personal observations of missed learning opportunities when classroom technology was available for use but ‘collecting dust’ in a corner.

- Honestly, some technology is still in closets. Need to teach teachers how easy it can be.
- Need open access products.
- Infrastructure – it’s an issue for northern Ontario.

INNOVATION

Innovation is happening in Ontario education but it is not yet a ubiquitous feature of school culture. Roundtable participants had differing views about how to assure our collective capacity for innovation. Many noted the important role of principals as leaders in fostering innovation.

- Need to encourage teachers to see themselves as leaders. Promote a culture of sharing, taking risks, making mistakes.
- Pockets of innovation – need to be more systemic. Need to find ways of bringing innovators together.
ACCESS AND EQUITY

Participants offered insights into the many facets of access and equity that they felt apply to digital resources, technology, infrastructure and connectivity in and between schools. The discussions also pointed to examples of technology-enabled global connections and a sense of global citizenship that make a difference in crossing boundaries to address equity issues in wider communities beyond the school, often times. Such connections are often championed by students. It continues to be important throughout the system to attend to issues of the digital divide.

- Students think it is a right – it’s the way of the future, not an option – merge the worlds.
- Need to mind the equity gap to close the achievement gap – access, connectivity.
- How do we work in a more efficient way with the resources we have?
- Some kids don’t go home to a wired universe. We need to continue looking at the digital divide.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Roundtable participants valued this opportunity and they encouraged the ministry to include the wider community, especially parents.

- We haven’t kept parents in the loop about incorporating technology into learning.
- Parents should be asked to have these discussions.
- Take the knowledge of this dialogue public...build a community to support this direction.

SOME IDEAS FOR ACTION

Each roundtable session ended with a whole group discussion on the question of, “What should or could happen at a system, school and classroom level?” The discussions generated a starting list of over 30 actionable ideas. The ministry will continue to collect ideas as part of the roundtable and through stakeholder discussion during winter/spring 2011. This cumulative list of possible actions will be revisited after the research, information gathering and stakeholder dialogues are complete. The ministry will begin the next phase with sector leaders to set priorities and develop a longer-term plan of action.

MOVING FORWARD WITH 2011 ROUNDTABLES AND STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

The June 10th discussions were invigorating, inspiring and informative. These initial conversations, together with what the research is saying, have helped the ministry to set a focus for sponsoring a continued dialogue within the sector about teaching and learning in a digital world.

Are we collectively doing our best to harness instructional technology to good effect so that our students have the opportunities they need to achieve success and realize their full potential? How would we know that our efforts are making a difference?

As a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report characterizes the shifting context for considering new and emerging policy concerns in this area, “The question is not which technology leads to increased productivity in education, but which new technology-enabled methodologies improve student performance over traditional ones, if any at all, and which other factors intervene?” (Scheuermann & Pedro, 2009, p. 7)

Ontario has much to contribute to and learn from the global conversation and growing evidence-base on effective practices connected with teaching and learning in the digital world.

Footnote: