

NOT BEING CLOUDED BY THE CLOUD

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In education, the word “cloud” can limit our thinking.

The cloud is just a way to envision where education tools live. In general, it’s a distinction between having teaching and learning software on computers that are owned and operated by the school or district – local – or owned and operated by a remote company – in the cloud. There are reasons why either option can make sense and I know and work with schools using local systems and those who’ve chosen cloud services. However in education, the tools themselves and how they’re used are what matter. Where they are hosted is a different issue from usage.

If the term “cloud” is clouding how or how often teachers and schools are using remote education technologies, that’s too bad because very few things have the power to do more good, to expand access to quality instruction at scale than do teaching online and delivering high-quality tools online.

Keep in mind too that online does not mean only at home or in remote learning. Millions of classrooms access Internet-based resources and online instruction and supplemental learning solutions in their classrooms. Watching a YouTube video of the Mars Rover as part of a science lesson is using an Internet-based resource, but it can be done either in the classroom or at home.

In other words, no matter where learning is happening, using cloud-based learning increases access to the number of available resources. It also—very significantly—gives more students access to more resources than they would get from what the teacher or district has on hand, stored in the boxes and cabinets and resource rooms of their schools.

That does not mean that online learning tools and practices are free from challenges.

One built-in challenge with using online resources is that, in most cases, they necessarily divert a student’s focus away from a teacher and to a screen. And once diverted, student attention can wander. Again, that’s a challenge we see in using online resources in a classroom – the teacher can’t stand over the shoulder of

every student at the same time. Attention and distraction challenges are even more acute when a student is remote, when the teacher is not physically present.

I was recently on a panel on cloud and classroom technologies with Monte McCubbin, an IT leader with Simi Valley Unified School District in California. He said, “You now have 30 or however many students in your classroom, they’re all on their Chromebook or laptop . . . and they’re supposed to be on whatever tool, say it’s a website for math or science or whatever the website tool is that you’re choosing to use. And or they’re supposed to be doing a research assignment for history, whatever it is. Them staying on task is near impossible.”

McCubbin described just one of the challenges with using remote on online learning resources. Connectivity and technology confidence are also issues, very significant ones.

Quoting McCubbin again, “One big shift in this distance learning has been we’re not just supporting students, but we’re supporting parents, which a lot of times aren’t even as knowledgeable with our Google tools as the kids are because the kids have been sitting in the classroom using them before this pandemic hit,” he said.

He’s right, of course. And serious as those issues are, they do not blot out the educational power that student technology devices – laptops, tablets and smartphones – can deliver when used effectively.

And so, the key question becomes not if we use Internet resources and teaching technology – not even how we deliver it, cloud vs. classroom. The biggest question is how we can deliver the richest resources with the widest and deepest possible access without making our teachers and students and parents and schools administrators crazy, forever learning new systems, not to mention having to switch between programs and devices.

Now especially when teaching is constantly shifting between in-class and

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By Al Kingsley

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remote and hybrid, it’s a major priority to make learning tools and systems simple, easy and uniform. From purely the learning view, it should not matter – I argue it does not matter – whether a learning lesson lives on a server in the school’s basement or one owned by Amazon. It cannot matter whether a student is reading material and taking quizzes in their classroom or their living room. The experience, the products and procedures have to be compatible and uniform for everyone, everywhere.

That’s our mandate. And we have to get it right.

The “cloud” is neither the answer nor the obstacle to quality teaching and learning with technology. The more we make that true by eliminating device and delivery barriers and focusing on challenges such as digital literacy, confidence and access, the more students we will serve, and the more equitable those opportunities will be than ever.



Al Kingsley is CEO of NetSupport, which supports 18 million devices used in learning throughout the globe. NetSupport produces a range of education solutions, including a cloud-based remote learning solution and an IT Asset Management solution to manage and support IT assets across a school or district network. He is a sought after speaker and is the co-host of popular EdTech solutions podcast, the ‘Check it Out!’ show.