

Ed-tech: Making industry collaboration work for your school

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Collaboration between schools and ed-tech companies is one of the priorities of the government's digital strategy. Al Kingsley looks at the risks, rewards and cost-benefits for schools considering a co-production partnership.

"We need the future of technology in education to be driven by collaboration."

This was one of the takeaways from the [Department for Education's digital strategy](#), which was launched last year (DfE, 2019) – and I am not sure anyone involved in education would disagree.

Educators are generally great collaborators, whether with each other, with charities, government initiatives or with parents and students. However, when it comes to collaborating with commercial suppliers school leaders can be more wary. I can understand why.

Co-production – suppliers and schools working together to develop technologies – can be risky. Done right, co-production benefits school as much as supplier, giving preferential and cost-effective access to state-of-the-art technologies. Done wrong, it can be resource-draining. In my position as a vendor and a multi-academy trust board member I see both sides.

The first question of course is: Why co-produce? Well, any technologies used in schools must be underpinned by evidence that they actually work. Again, I think this is something we can all agree on! Without evidence of ed-tech's impact, derived from in-class testing, we veer into very dangerous territory.

However, if schools are to benefit from evidence-based technology they must give companies the opportunity to engage with them during the

technology's development.

As the DfE digital strategy says: "Ed-tech businesses often struggle to access education institutions to test, pilot and prototype their products. Teachers, school and college leaders and business managers are rightly focused on the day-to-day needs of their students and their organisations.

"This means the feedback that ed-tech products and services developers receive can be limited, which in turn hinders the ability of ed-tech innovators to evaluate and refine their offer."



Despite the government's focus on greater collaboration between educators and ed-tech companies, advice on what this should look like can be sparse. As part of the DfE's digital strategy some schools are acting as testbeds for co-production excellence, however this programme is still in its infancy.

For ambitious schools, keen to innovate alongside suppliers, there are several issues to bear in mind. Co-production can be rewarding if both parties are clear on the terms of their

relationship. For schools considering a co-production partnership, here are the key questions they need to consider:

What are the vendor's real intentions?

In education, co-production is fundamental to make sure suppliers deliver what teachers actually need, rather than what they think teachers need. Therefore, whether the vendor in question is truly entrenched in the education community really matters. This means looking past the brochure and websites and questioning who

the people behind the product are and where their interests really lie.

Do they understand and have experience within education – putting time and effort into understanding educational needs – or are they on the periphery, simply selling into schools? That means asking probing questions: their background, external roles, what impact, evidence and research do they have to support their approach?

Do not be drawn in by the latest buzzwords – AI, AR or the like. You



need to be confident that they are as grounded in education as they are in technology.

Similarly, it is important to be clear on the boundaries of the project. Is this a case of co-design, i.e. a long-term exploration of the needs and opportunities for tech within the school, or is this a “test and learn” situation where suppliers work with schools to rapidly test their product so they can improve it.

If you are considering a longer-term co-production relationship with a supplier then it is essential that they do not isolate technology from teaching and they consider the whole context.

That means they are as focused on working with teachers on pedagogical development as they are on technological innovation. Again, this is why it is so important to know the people behind the product and know whether their interest extends beyond technical processes to pedagogy as well.

Does the project align with our school’s digital strategy?

Before engaging in any ed-tech project, schools need to ask this question. If your school has not defined its digital strategy, then be very wary of committing to any ed-tech project until you have.

At its simplest, a digital strategy is a plan of what you want to achieve and why. With this in hand you can then assess whether co-production will pay off. There is little point agreeing to put effort into testing an application which does not result in impact where you need it.

You may be offered any number of incentives to test a product, but remember, just because something is free does not mean it is not expensive. The main cost of co-production is usually time – implementation, training, feedback all adds up. If that cost cannot be attributed to an identified, long-term key objective, it is a waste.

Any decision regarding technology needs to be made with the school’s digital strategy in mind. Again, the DfE’s advice for schools seeking to devise a digital strategy is a little lacking! However, while devising a digital strategy can seem like a daunting task there are guides and expertise available to help and it is something about which I have written previously for SecEd ([Kingsley, 2020](#)).

What should we expect and how closely to engage?

Every co-production project will be different. It could involve working with an existing supplier on current solutions, perhaps testing new

or refined features. Teachers will already be using the product, know its strengths and weaknesses and may already have clear ideas for improvement and evolution.

Alternatively, it could be beta testing a product, putting a solution through its paces prior to release, or being given early access to discounted or free versions of new technology, which can be exciting. It might be starting at the drawing board and helping shape a new solution to meet a current need.

However, testing or collaborating on specification can create extra work for teachers who will need to be trained, and who must commit to reporting and providing feedback.

That is why it is important to reflect on your digital strategy. Will the time and effort required get us closer to our goal? If it aligns then make sure you understand and agree with the level of support and training teachers will be given, the mechanisms to enable fast, streamlined feedback and the added extras you will access as part of the scheme. Do not be afraid to ask the question of yourselves: “Do we get as much or more out of this relationship than we put in?”

Don’t be guinea pigs, be partners

Let us be clear: co-production is about shaping and polishing solutions so they are the best they can be. That means suppliers must be transparent about why the technology exists and any issues they are seeking to solve. With that in mind co-production is not about putting ill-designed, half-finished products in the classroom, using students as human guinea pigs! No supplier should expect a school to risk student attainment or teacher wellbeing in this way – if they do, walk away.

Seek a co-production partner that is open and honest, understands and appreciates your digital strategy, is embedded in education, and can clearly demonstrate they are in it for the right reasons.