

## **INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: EXTENDING THE CLASSROOM COMMUNITY OF DISCOURSE.**

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to provide a theoretical framework for the use of computer-based Information and Communications Technology (ICT) as a resource within classroom religious education. It is argued that the religious education class is best regarded as a learning space in which pupils can acquire fluency in the use of religious language, a language of transcendence with which they can articulate the mystery of self by humbly standing before the mystery of the 'other'. It can be seen as establishing and sustaining a community of discourse which provides opportunities for religious speech acts which are enriched by the ongoing interaction with the wider religious traditions of humankind made possible by the use of the Internet. In this way religious speech acts can be extended beyond the zone of discourse available within the local community to encompass the wider religious traditions of humankind.

### **Introduction**

The use of computers (or Information and Communications Technology – ICT) in education in general, and religious education in particular, raises important epistemological issues. Any technological medium is not neutral but has an embedded epistemology structuring knowledge itself and the act of knowing in distinctive ways. Computers are essentially powerful and fast devices for processing data; they allow us to access, manipulate, store and disseminate it. Organized 'chunks' or 'patterns' of data constitute information. It is worth noting that the phrase 'Information Technology' (IT) is increasingly being replaced by the phrase 'Information and Communications Technology' (ICT) when referring to the use of networked computer technology within education. Computers are not just a device for accessing and manipulating 'data'; they provide a technology to enhance the possibilities of communication<sup>1</sup> between the people who use the networked technology.

Over the past few decades how have computers been used in education generally and in religious education in particular? Several evolutionary trends in Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) or Computer Mediated Learning (CML) can be noted each with an associated epistemology. The earliest form of computer software for use in educational contexts was based upon drill and review methodologies designed to present and reinforce the learning of factual information. For example in the 1980s software became available to teach skills relating to finding books, chapters and verses in the Bible or to teach the basic geography of the Holy Land. Such programmes were a useful motivation tool for individual learners but were severely limited in terms of group or whole-class use. Further the teacher was unable to adapt the programme to meet the needs of specific pupils. They were based upon a behaviourist stimulus-

response approach to learning. As computers became more generally available and more powerful a second type of largely text-based software became available which allowed information to be presented in a manner which was adaptable to the specific needs of individual learners. It was possible to structure individualised learning paths to ensure mastery of the information provided. Few such software programmes were developed for use in religious education. Their use in education generally was limited due to high development costs and their inability to meet the expectations of individual classroom teachers. The approach highlighted learning alone with a machine under the remote direction of the teacher.

During the mid 1990s the increase in computer processing speeds and the substantial drop in cost of computer processors resulted in the wider availability of multimedia PCs often equipped with high capacity CDROM disk drives. Such technology provided a platform for the provision of multimedia resources for teaching and learning including short video clips, picture files, audio files and text files. The shift from software programmes to teaching and learning resources placed the emphasis back on the classroom teacher who used such multimedia resources as a research tool to prepare classroom lessons and handouts, as a presentation medium (especially when linked to a data projector) to support whole class exposition, and to resource independent pupil research or group work into a particular topic.

Towards the end of the 1990s schools and universities increasingly became equipped with networked computer workstations set up on either Local Area Networks (LANs) or Wide Area Networks (WANs)<sup>2</sup>. Most schools in Western industrialised societies now have dedicated computer networks in place and such facilities are often available to the teacher of religion.

Networked computer technology shifted the focus away from the individual student using a stand-alone computer to groups of learners using individual workstations linked to a common server or sets of servers. They have the potential to provide a collaborative learning environment. At the start of the twenty-first century a further significant development in ICT that can be noted is the extension of networked computer environments to include the World Wide Web. The Internet is fast becoming the central nervous system of the global village.

The classroom of today and tomorrow will differ from the classroom of yesterday; our students will become constructors of information, engaged in real problem solving based on the real world. The internet will facilitate teachers and students to learn collaboratively rather than in isolation.  
(Hallisy & Hurley, 1997, p. 71).

It is this new context of computer supported collaborative learning in religious education that we shall address.

### **Cyberspace and Linguistic Communities**

Although the World Wide Web has been in existence since 1989 it is only in the past decade that it has emerged as a mass medium. The Internet is the result of both media convergence and extensive networking of computers in the public space.

The Internet...is instantaneous, immediate, worldwide, decentralised, interactive, endlessly expandable in contents and outreach, flexible and adaptable to a remarkable degree... According to users' tastes, it lends itself equally well to active participation and to passive absorption into a narcissistic, self-referential world of stimuli with near-narcotic effects. It can be used to break down the isolation of individuals and groups or to deepen it.  
(Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, # 7)

The implications of the Internet for religious education are enormous. Pupils can access information from numerous sponsoring communities (for instance Internet 'hosts' such as the *Holy See*, <http://www.vatican.va/>, and the Jesuit sponsored *Sacred Space*, <http://www.jesuit.ie/prayer/>. The *Taize Community*, <http://www.taize.fr/en/index.htm>, *BuddhaNet*, <http://www.buddhanet.net/>, *Ask the Rabbi*, <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/askrabbi.htm> or

*Investigating Islam*, <http://www.islamic.org.uk/>. With ease they have access to a vast electronic library of current information reflecting a multiplicity of perspectives. But simply accessing the www is not enough. How does the Internet 'surfer' deal with 'Fred's Favourite Religious Beliefs' website?

Unstructured 'web-surfing' has few benefits in the formal education setting resulting in information that is decontextualised, that lacks authority, reliability and structure. Thus the use of the Internet as learning resources raises vital and urgent epistemological questions concerning the nature of knowledge, information, community, authority and the validity of data. Used in a random way the Internet can reinforce the notion of the isolated learner accessing information without the support of a community.

Will the audience of the future be a multitude of audiences of one?...What would become of solidarity—what would become of love—in a world like that?  
(Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, # 13).

Recent Roman Catholic documentation from the Magisterium has highlighted some of the challenges the Internet poses.

The two-way interactivity of the Internet is blurring the old distinction between those who communicate and those who receive what is communicated, and creating a situation in which, potentially at least, everyone can do both. (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, # 6).

Concerning the use of the Internet:

the fundamental ethical principle is this: the human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons.  
(Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, # 3).

Awareness of this principal enables the Internet to be used in a manner which overcomes the 'digital divide' between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'. 'When based upon shared values rooted in the nature of the person, the intercultural dialogue made possible by the Internet and other media of social communication can be "a privileged means for building the civilization of

love.” (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, # 9). The Internet can be used to promote a religious worldview. It can help:

men and women in their age-old search for self-understanding. In every age, including our own, people ask the same fundamental questions: “Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?”

(Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002, #18).

### **Speech Acts and Cyberspace**

The Internet and networked computer systems have the potential to support collaborative learning environments in which the pupils become active ‘constructors of knowledge’ rather than passive recipients of information.<sup>3</sup> This requires the conceptualisation of the school classroom in a new way, as a learning space which is defined by a distinctive use of language within conversational ‘speech acts’. The potential of this development has yet to be fully recognised for religious education.

Anna Cicognani (1998) reflects upon the relationship between space and cyberspace. The term ‘cyberspace’ is a combination of ‘cybernetics’ (the theory and application of electronic, digital and biological information systems) and ‘space’. She considers cyberspace to be a ‘linguistic construction’ (Cicognani, 1998, p. 16) that occurs in a distinctive space. Following Lefebvre (1991) she distinguishes three types of space: physical space (nature and the cosmos), mental space (including logic and formal abstractions) and social space (the domain of social interactions). These three primary spaces interact with each other and are rarely found alone. Two key aspects of any space are ‘livability’, the possibility of personally dwelling comfortably within the space, and the ‘community’ which shares the space, which builds it and is sustained by it. Cyberspace can be considered as either an extension of these three primary spaces or as a fourth form of space, a ‘hybrid space’, an ‘electronic space’ which resides between the domains of physical and mental space; “cyberspace becomes another venue for consciousness itself” (Cocognani, 1998, p. 22) As such cyberspace is a linguistic environment which facilitates communication and mental construction. The outcomes of the activities that occur within cyberspace depend upon the characteristics of the language used. (Cocagnani, 1998, p. 23). Language has a constructive function, our awareness and knowledge of the world in which we are located is dependent upon the language we have available to interact with it and name it.

The shared use of language in cyberspace creates ‘virtual communities’ (VCs) or ‘Collaborative Virtual Environments’ (CVEs). In exploring such ‘linguistic spaces’ Cicognani and Maher (1997) draw upon Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969, 1971, 1976, 1991) theories of speech acts. To see language merely in terms of its descriptive functions - to outline some state of affairs or state some fact - is reductionist. Language is essentially performative and constructive rather than descriptive. Wittgenstein for instance saw language primarily as a vehicle for social activity rather than for description and therefore focused on ‘language use’ (pragmatics). Two key issues for linguistic theory are “what kinds of actions do we perform in language” and “how does an utterance have meaning”. While in everyday transactions such speech acts are largely spoken utterances, in the environment of cyberspace they are presently largely textual statements. The defining feature of a speech act is that it is made ‘in conversation’ be that a ‘face-to-face’ encounter or a mediated encounter such as that made possible through the World Wide Web.

### **Religious Knowing and Religious Language (religious speech acts)**

We must now consider the nature of classroom based religious speech acts. Religious speech acts are differentiated from other speech acts by the nature of religious knowing and the place that religious language and the religious imagination play in such knowing. Information is not the same as knowledge. Knowledge is information embedded within the traditions of a community that interprets ongoing human experience. It is characterised by a context that includes a critical memory of the past, a reconstruction of the past in the present moment, and an imaginative projection into the future. The problem with information, for instance with information taken from the Internet, is that it may be disembodied, decontextualised, and lacking a community context. Information can only become knowledge in the context of a community that nurtures the individual learner and humbly, yet with authority, offers an interpretative framework. Further when considering learning we must draw a distinction between ‘knowledge’, the ‘knower’ and ‘knowing’. The knowledge of which a community is the custodian can only become the possession of a new ‘knower’ through the act of ‘knowing’. John Dewey (1916, pp. 159-160) made this point many decades ago when he argued that the existing knowledge of a community should not be regarded as a static deposit but as a stimulus to ‘knowing’. No thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another, but rather information can stimulate the individual to engage with thought. This is an important distinction. Classroom religious education should

not define itself solely in terms of the transmission of the religious knowledge of which a particular religious tradition is the custodian but should rather be concerned with stimulating and enhancing the active, evolving religious knowing of each pupil by initiating, resourcing, sustaining and validating religious speech acts. Religious knowing is intimately linked to self-expression and exploration being closer to 'dance' and 'art' than to 'mathematics', 'philosophy' or 'science'. It requires performative speech acts.

In recent decades much has been published on the nature of religious language (e.g., Black 1962, McFague, 1975, 1983, Ramsey 1957, 1964, 1973, Sockice, 1985 and Tracey 1981). Such reflection has clarified that religious language is primarily an affective language dependent upon metanarratives and having an essential analogical structure which finds expression in a number of ways as underlying root paradigms or 'theological models' and as concrete entities such as shared verbal metaphors, ritual activities and ongoing interaction with symbols and artefacts (See McGrady 1990, 1993). Religious speech acts can thus be seen to involve primarily a metaphorical mode of expression. They have a performative character (for instance a sacrament is regarded as a religious symbol which effects what it signifies) and are concerned with articulating the language of transcendence rather than the language of experience. They enable the individual to articulate the mystery of Self and the Other, a language with which to explore the transcendent dimension of human experience. In recent times there has been an emphasis within religious education on the life experience of the pupil. The language of experience is limited by individual human experience in a particular time and place. It may lack resonance and fail to truly satisfy. Religion is characterised by a concern for ultimacy in interaction with the immediate, concrete experience. A language of transcendence is needed to articulate the knowing of the mystery of self, the mystery of the human other, the mystery of the cosmos and the mystery of the ultimate Other whom we name 'God'. Religious knowing involves personal knowledge and openness to the other; it is the knowing that arises in relationships, that comes from the journey to the centre of self and from glimpsing the mystery of the presence of the Divine Other at the core of the mystery of self. Though such religious speech acts one enters, and abides in, 'sacred space'.

Thus religious education is concerned with facilitating the pupil's acquisition of a language with which to explore the transcendent dimension of human experience. But language can never be learned in isolation and requires more than fluency in processing detached information; it is learned in

dialogue with a community and requires the articulation of personal religious speech acts.

### **The Classroom as a Community of Discourse**

We must now apply what has been said above to the school classroom. This is a personal, distinctive and intimate space. It is the primary learning space of formal schooling. At its best a classroom can be regarded as constituting a community of discourse, a distinctive learning space in which linguistic fluency is actively constructed through ongoing 'speech acts' originating in dialogue with the faith tradition of the sponsoring religious community. Such 'speech acts' require a vocabulary, a topic, a set of utterances (articulation) and an ongoing conversation between linguistic partners.

During the school day teachers and pupils participate in many such classroom conversations. Every academic discipline, be it mathematics, science, literature, religious education, or history, provides a classical and dynamic way of interpreting cumulative human experience. The tradition of the discipline is an interpretative and linguistic resource offered to the individual learner. To be a learner, or a teacher, is to participate in such an academic tradition in a dynamic way. While this is true of all academic disciplines, it is particularly the case when the 'data' which the discipline interprets is that of human experience. Such is the case with religious education.

Each community of discourse also provides what may be called a distinctive zone of discourse. To illustrate this consider the informal community of discourse that is the human family. It is here that the infant first learns to speak its native language. Language is initially acquired informally in the practical concrete situation of social interaction between the infant and those in its immediate family, most significantly the parents of the infant and other immediate family members. Through such interaction, initially by the reinforcement of utterances by trial-and-error learning and subsequently by the deliberate modelling of the utterances of others, the infant gradually refines linguistic competence by extending its vocabulary and through articulation and conversation gradually gains fluency. It is important to note that this initial zone of discourse determines the parameters of language acquisition and defines its 'tone': the vocabulary acquired is limited to the vocabulary of the immediate family, the sentence construction used when making the utterance, the range of topics addressed, and even the accent with which the infant speaks, are all dependant upon the zone of discourse of a particular family. The infant, however, should not be regarded as passive in this linguistic environment. Rather the infant is an active participant, often initiating the linguistic transactions with other family members, and at all

times acquiring language by speaking. The fundamental point here is that language acquisition depends upon the utterance of speech acts and the context in which such articulation (conversation) occurs. The zone of discourse in which the infant initially acquires language is of course gradually and substantially broadened through wider social interaction, increasing personal experience, interaction with virtual communities through the use of the mass media and the onset of formal education with the entry to schooling. Thus the child comes to participate in a growing range of communities of discourse. Throughout formal education the class or subject teacher provide a specific zone of discourse (the classroom) related to the particular subject of the school curriculum being studied. Thus, the available zone of discourse in which the conversation occurs conditions linguistic development and speech act utterances. Progressively encountered zones of discourse move from the restricted to the more open and from the singular to the plural. By definition the zone of discourse in any classroom is limited by the experience of its membership particularly by its geographical and social characteristics.

#### **Classroom Religious Education as a Community of Discourse**

Traditionally the religious education classroom has been seen as a 'community of faith' in a confessional sense. Contemporary pluralistic culture and best educational practice require a redefinition of the conversations that occur within it. While the role of classroom religious education is clearly not to impose the faith of a particular religious denomination neither can it ignore faith, or worse still, be antagonistic towards faith. Classroom religious education must acknowledge faith and see it as its key learning resource. The religious education classroom must be a place that is hospitable towards faith, a place in which faith 'feels at home'. As such, the religious education class can be seen as constituting a community of discourse that seeks to nurture the religious imagination and develop the religious language of those who participate in its faith-centred conversations as pupil or as teacher. In such a context religious language is nurtured. According to John M. Hull conversations are expressions of the way people share in a search for the truth, and talk with each other as part of that search. What seems to matter is not only the subject of conversation but the manner in which the conversation is held.

The concept of 'zone of discourse' can be applied to an approach that sees religious education primarily in terms of developing religious language through the performance of religious speech acts within religious conversations. In the Irish context

the Department of Education and Science have introduced a new state syllabus for religious education for use in the junior cycle of secondary schools. This syllabus describes itself as ecumenical and interfaith. It lists the following aims of religious education (Junior Certificate RE Syllabus, 2000, p. 5:

- To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples, of all ages and at all times;
- To explore how this search for meaning has found, and continues to find, expression in religion;
- To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life;
- To identify how understandings of God, religious traditions, and in particular the Christian tradition, have contributed to the culture in which we live, and continue to have an impact on personal life-style, interpersonal relationships and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts;
- To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student.

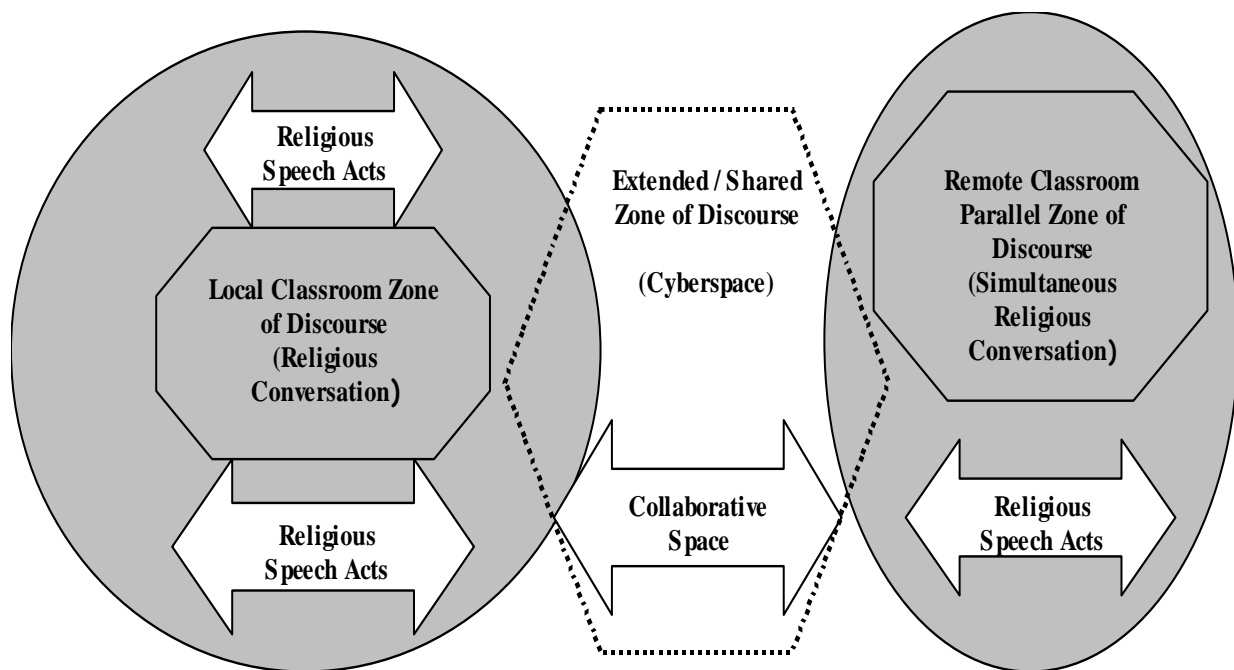
Such aims require a dialectic ethos within the religious education classroom. The traditions of the various faith communities of humankind are to be approached as an interpretative resource focusing and sustaining such religious conversations within the classroom community of discourse. They resource the making of religious speech acts uttered in the face of mystery. They add critical factors to the limited immediate experience of the participants to the conversation in any physical classroom. The first of these is memory; religious traditions represent the cumulative religious memories of humankind ('anamnesis' or 'remembering' is a defining characteristic of religious speech acts). The second critical factor within a religious community of discourse is that of 'authority' that validates the speech acts of the participants. Such validation essentially relates to 'resonance'; the speech act allows the speaker to glimpse transcendent mystery in a way that 'fits' with personal experience and with the cumulative experience of the religious tradition.

#### **The Role of ICT in RE: Extending the Zone of Discourse.**

It is argued here that the primary role of ICT in religious education is to extend the zone of discourse to enrich the conversation within the religious education classroom by accessing the

wider religious traditions of humankind. The religious education classroom conversation is initially resourced by its participants (teacher and pupils), by their immediate religious experience

and by the religious tradition of the school. ICT can be used to extend the zone of discourse to include a parallel virtual zone of discourse inclusive of other faith communities and traditions.



### Computer Enabled Collaborative Linguistic Space for Religious Education

It is not intended to provide too specific a methodology for the use of ICT since the approach will obviously differ depending upon the topic being considered, the ICT facilities available and the level of computer literacy held by both the religious educator and the pupils. However the following guidelines for good practice can be identified.

Firstly, the focus when using ICT in religious education must always be upon promoting communication between people. ICT is a means to an end not an end in itself. The Internet is best used to bring pupils and teachers in a number of classroom 'religious conversations' together. Teachers should therefore establish 'eLearning partnerships' with teachers in other schools representing other faith communities who are prepared to simultaneously engage in parallel religious conversations using the Internet as a collaborative platform. Such eLearning resources should include not only textual and multimedia files, they should also include the possibilities of email discussion groups with others from different faith traditions. Interaction between participating classrooms needs to be two-way. Teachers and

pupils in all participating classrooms should create and share documents relating to the practices and beliefs of their faith traditions as these provide insight into the topic of conversation.

Secondly, the classroom communities of discourse are best established around a 'topic of transcendence' – a question relating to the ultimate mystery of human existence, for instance 'does suffering have any meaning?', 'what is of real value in life?', 'can I be loved and love in return?', 'is there anything after this life?', 'where does evil come from?', 'why do bad things happen to good people?', 'is there a God who knows and loves me personally or is my existence just due to chance or biological impulse?', 'why are religious beliefs such a potent source on conflict between people?', or 'how should I relate to other people and the wider world in which I find myself?'. Such questions have real potential for inter-faith and interreligious dialogue.

Thirdly, ICT should only be used to resource existing, pre-established religious conversations within the participating religious education classrooms. Such conversations must have already

begun and have been well established before access to cyberspace and they must subsequently continue 'off-line'. Students and teachers engage actively with others within the community of discourse by articulating their present personal stance, researching the stances of others and critiquing and empathising with such stances. They engage by making religious speech acts that are resourced by the wider religious traditions of humanity. These are made available by listening to others physically present in the classroom and by engaging in the wider interaction and research using the tools provided by the Internet. But such Internet related activity must always feedback into the cycle of stance articulation and rearticulation that is sustained within the local classroom community of discourse.

Fourthly, teachers should guide other Internet research by preparing research focus sheets that include hyperlinks to Internet sites of immediate relevance, value and quality. The random gathering of information by pupils from the Internet should be minimised.

The role of ICT is therefore secondary, but vital. If it is to be of real educational value to resource religious conversations concerning topics of transcendence its use must be carefully prepared and structured by a number of teachers (from different faith traditions) working together. However, genuine and collaborative dialogue with other living faith traditions is the oxygen that gives life to religious language and religious knowing. The Internet offers exciting opportunities to broaden the classroom community of discourse in a way that accesses, acknowledges and appreciates the living faith traditions of humankind.

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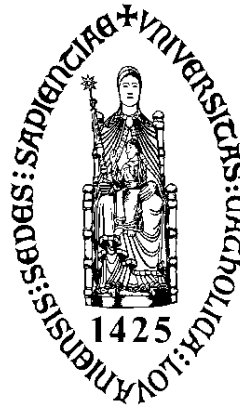
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#### Endnotes

1. From an ecclesial perspective it is important to note that since the Second Vatican Council documents emanating from the Magisterium have referred to the 'means of social communication' rather than to the 'electronic' or 'mass' media. This trend has continued in recent papal statements on the use of the Internet as a tool for evangelisation.
2. Unpublished research carried out by the author in secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland in May 2001 found that 94% of schools had a dedicated ICT network for pupil use, 81% allowed these networked facilities to be used for religious education, and 94% provided Internet access for teachers.
3. Media convergence is continuing as new technologies come on stream. Thus formerly expensive video conferencing facilities are becoming available on school networks by linking web-cams to the Internet.

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