This is a timely book, coming out as schools in the United Kingdom begin to think about the New Opportunities Funding for training in information and communications technology (ICT) and colleges are working to enable their students to meet the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) requirements laid down in Circular 4/98. The book seeks to address both student and teacher audiences. The title is an ambitious one. The question - children or computers in control is addressed theoretically in the second chapter - but no compelling reasons are given for one or the other side, and later chapters expand on both approaches with short notes on main teaching and learning issues and what to avoid after each section. The style of writing using commonly asked questions to lead each section does make it easy to locate content, and the chapters are clearly structured and deal with:

- how to organise ICT within the school (Chapters 2-4);
- types of software which could be used (Chapters 5 and 6);
- ICT within the curriculum (Chapters 7-10).

The first chapter on why use ICT introduces a lot of ideas and history about the way computers have been introduced into primary classrooms, not to solve problems and issues which teachers had, but as solutions looking for questions. Ager points out the ambiguity in the government's purpose when insisting on networking schools and developing children's ICT capability. They seem to want children to be trained in the techniques needed to make use of current and future technology, and at the same time provide a nationwide facility (giving even greater centralised control?) for 'worksheets at the touch of a button'. He makes an attempt to interpret the features of ICT delineated in the DfEE Circular 4/98 as requirements for initial teacher training.

The argument for enhancing learning gets somewhat buried in the technology and the overriding approach of this first chapter develops along the lines of 'we have to do it - so this is how we might go about it' discussing what we need to know and what technology we need to do it.

Though being careful not to specify particular software packages, the underlying model is one of schools using a Microsoft Windows platform running standard office software, which indeed has been adopted by many schools. As a result the discussion of applications is heavily weighted towards presentation - through word processors, desk top publishing or graph drawing, at the expense of the logical
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and analytical thinking side of computer use, focusing on activities rather than learning objectives. Much of the information on using ICT across the curriculum in the later chapters is concerned with what types of application to use rather than what to do with them or how to bring out the cognitive value of their use. That there are different ways of using the same software, some of which will be educationally beneficial, and others which amount to ‘going through the motions’ is not mentioned. Teaching the children the techniques to access office software is considered to be an end in itself – as an interpretation of ICT capacity in the National Curriculum, yet many children do only this, and get no time to use these skills in taking responsibility for their own learning.

The book is full of lists and suggestions and could be useful for students writing essays on ICT, but does not go beyond the outline proposals either in the management of ICT throughout the school, or its day-to-day use within the classroom. It may provide a stimulus to teachers to go and seek out further information on a topic, but does not give leads or references to take them forward and has a very limited bibliography consisting mainly of official documents from DfEE, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority etc. with a few, much more useful National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) curriculum IT support documents.

In the chapter on ICT in early years it mentions overlay keyboards, as the National Curriculum also suggests the use of a variety of input methods for young children, however most schools have put their keyboards firmly away in the back of the cupboard as being obsolete technology. Ager suggests that ready-made overlays are available to meet the teachers’ needs.

The issue in the title of who is in control is actually critical to the teachers’ enthusiastic take-up of ICT opportunities for their own classes. Much of the approach in the book suggests that it is fine if ‘others’ are in control – the computer with the bundled software it is provided with, the software developer who chooses particular examples to put into his quiz, or the overlay maker who provides ready-made overlays which may map very badly onto a particular lesson. I have to take issue with this. For teachers to become enthusiastic users of ICT, and so extend the children’s learning possibilities, they need to be in control of their own ICT use, which crucially involves them eventually adapting programs to meet their own lesson objectives. This is not an easy or particularly welcome answer for many teachers with little time to spare, but I think it remains true and underlies the historically poor take-up of computers across the curriculum. Even with integrated learning systems (ILS) teaching which Ager favours, the children’s progress depends on the teachers accepting the role of the computer work and complementing it within the classroom, broadening the children’s experiences and explaining issues which are poorly developed within the ILS. If teachers are not in control of their own computer use, then they will not inspire nor possibly even allow their pupils to take control of their own learning.

Helen Finlayson
Bishop Grosseteste College, Lincoln