

The Bancroft's Blend

How we get the best out of traditional and digital teaching and learning methods

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that technology has expanded - and continues to expand - at a rapid pace.

Digital devices and software are now an integral part of everyday life, shaping how we communicate, work, access information, and participate in society. As a school, we recognise that it is our responsibility not only to teach students how to use digital technologies effectively, safely and responsibly, but also to deploy these tools thoughtfully where they enhance learning and enrich the educational experience.

However, there can be a tendency to assume that anything digital in the classroom is inherently better. This is not a view we share at Bancroft's.

Furthermore, the need to critically evaluate the role and impact of digital technology in education is further heightened by the rapid emergence of large language models (AI). These tools make it increasingly easy for students to produce work without fully engaging in the underlying thinking, potentially weakening the development of genuine understanding. In this context, it becomes all the more important to create classroom environments where the use of devices is carefully managed, reducing distraction and temptation where necessary. This enables teachers to maintain clear visibility of students' work and thinking, ensuring that learning remains authentic, purposeful, and grounded in real intellectual effort.

2 Practice based on research and our experience

Since the introduction of devices in the classroom at Bancroft's, we have found that technology is most effective when it responds to clearly identified needs and supports broader educational strategies, rather than being introduced as a novelty or an end in itself.

Studies also indicate that students typically perform better in face-to-face learning environments, where direct interaction, dialogue and immediate feedback strengthen understanding and engagement. An overreliance on digital tools can, in some circumstances, reduce focus and depth of participation. Interestingly, Sweden, which had pursued the widespread and early adoption of devices in the classroom across its education system, including early childhood, has recently recalibrated its approach in response to increasing evidence of declining literacy and comprehension levels. This experience reinforces the value of a more balanced approach across all educational contexts, where technology is used selectively to support, rather than define, effective teaching and learning.

There is also compelling evidence regarding the cognitive benefits of traditional methods. Writing by hand - pen on paper - has been shown across many studies to improve memory retention, deepen cognitive processing and strengthen understanding when compared to typing on tablets or laptops. There is a body of evidence which supports this including research in 2024 at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology suggesting that students taking notes by computer were typing without thinking. Similarly, paper-based reading often leads to stronger comprehension, particularly when students are working under time pressure and with longer texts. Revision practices rooted in handwriting and paper-based study further support active recall and long-term memory retention.

Taken together, this research, and our own experience at Bancroft's, affirms that while digital technology has an important role to play, it must be used judiciously and in alignment with sound educational principles. Technology, therefore, is not a substitute for strong pedagogy. It is a tool - powerful when used deliberately and purposefully, but secondary to the quality of teaching, relationships, curriculum design, and classroom practice.

3 Our guiding principles

To ensure that digital technology supports the core principles of effective teaching and learning, we have developed the following principles to guide how it is used and considered at Bancroft's:

1. Expert subject knowledge and high-quality teaching are the foundation of learning. Technology is used purposefully to support clear educational aims and enhance teaching and learning.

2. Learning and revision are most effective when rooted in evidence-based practices such as handwriting, written homework, essays, and pen-and-paper revision, which improve understanding and strengthen long-term memory. Technology should complement these methods where appropriate.

3. Technology is adopted because it supports and strengthens effective teaching practices. Its role is to add value and build on what is working already in the classroom.

4. Students use and experience technology in different ways. The adoption of technology should remain flexible and inclusive to accommodate all needs.

5. Technology should simplify. Tools should be coherent, manageable, and compatible with existing systems.

6. Technology can ease administrative burden and free up time for teaching, but efficiency must not come at the expense of effective, well-established practices such as marking, providing feedback, and supporting student learning, all of which remain human-led.

4 What is the Bancroft's Blend?

At Bancroft's we are not anti-technology; we are pro-learning. Our approach is deliberate and principled. We ensure that technology serves education, not the other way around.

As such, we keep at the centre of our practice those more enduring elements of great teaching - the intellectual challenge, the clarity of human explanation, the discipline of unmediated thinking, and the

power of eye contact and live dialogue. Research, professional experience and informed instinct all point to the lasting value of these fundamentals.

We describe this approach as The Bancroft's Blend: a considered balance in which timeless educational practice is strengthened - but never overshadowed - by the intelligent use of digital technology.

The Bancroft's Blend places at the centre of every lesson the fundamental elements of effective learning: human relationships, clear explanation, pen and paper, and unmediated thinking. These elements are not automatic; they require consistent practice, skill, and careful planning by both teachers and students. Deep thinking, logical note-making, disciplined revision, structured problem-solving, essay writing, planning, and extended reasoning all depend on these methods. In a classroom guided by the Blend, students move away from instant gratification and gamification approaches and instead engage with challenges that require thought, reflection, and deliberate effort.

Working on paper allows students to structure their ideas, map out problems, and develop solutions in a way that is not constrained by a small screen or limited to pre-set options. Essays, extended calculations, and open-ended problems encourage sustained reasoning and planning, fostering independence and resilience.

All students have access to a device - iPads from Thirds to Fifth Form, and BYOD in the Sixth Form - but, like all learning tools, they are used thoughtfully and only when they genuinely enhance the lesson. Digital tools are used selectively, only where they genuinely enhance core teaching practices. The following section explains how technology is integrated to add real educational value.

5 When digital tools are appropriate and beneficial

Digital technology is used to teach digital skills which remain important even in an AI world, such as programming. These skills equip students with the ability to analyse data, solve problems logically, and work confidently with the tools that underpin many professional fields and degree courses.

Universities also rely extensively on online academic databases; accordingly, digital devices at school support guided research using scholarly sources such as JSTOR.

A powerful feature of digital technology is its capacity to organise and store large volumes of material efficiently. Digital notebooks can help students keep work structured, tidy, and easy to retrieve, while also providing access to lesson resources without the need to carry multiple textbooks. That said, we have found that extended reading on screens may be less effective for deep comprehension than reading on paper and textbooks in some instances allow students to navigate content more intuitively, observe information chronologically, and gain an immediate sense of what is available at a mere glance.

Digital platforms enhance collaboration, particularly when students are working together on projects. They enable co-creation of documents, presentations, and mind maps, allowing ideas to be developed collectively. Shared digital spaces make contributions visible, support accountability, and allow teachers to monitor progress and provide timely guidance where needed.

Technology can improve the speed of formative assessment, including real-time feedback through shared documents. Online quizzes provide also instant responses that can help address straightforward misconceptions quickly - though such formats are no substitute for sustained, thoughtful assessment and when used, should be used in tandem. Teachers can also annotate work digitally or record voice notes,

offering clear, personalised guidance. AI may have a role in offering supplementary feedback to pupils outside of normal teaching periods (e.g. during holidays), provided the tool has been explicitly approved by the teacher. All AI-generated guidance must be carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy, relevance, and pedagogical quality. Digital platforms also enable students to create self-marking flashcards, supporting active recall and AI tools may assist in generating practice materials or revision prompts.