



Brad Tipp has been a technologist for as long as he can remember. He joined Microsoft back in 1996, working with institutions in the public sector, including Leicester University, the first university to run Active Directory. After a stint with Cap Gemini, he returned to Microsoft four years ago to head the company's education cloud services, within the Worldwide Education Group

The tipping point for education

As director of education cloud services at Microsoft, Brad Tipp knows better than most what the software giant has in store for schools and universities. He answers our questions

What is cloud computing?

“Cloud computing is just a way of running your IT without doing all the hard work. Instead of buying your hardware and software and setting it up and maintaining it yourself, you buy a finished service. You just flip a switch and don’t think about how it works. We think of it as IT as a service.”

Why has cloud computing suddenly become so popular?

“Like all overnight successes, cloud computing has been coming for a while. But for many people, especially in education, it’s still relatively new. It’s popular in education now because teachers and students have different expectations of the services they use than they did before. They’re now used to going online and using web-based programs, like Hotmail, and they expect these applications to be easy right from the start.

“The financial situation has also played a part. Cloud services are compelling in their ability to reduce costs in any organisation. There’s no upfront investment – no hardware to buy, no software to install – and storing

data ‘in the cloud’ is much cheaper than doing it yourself.”

How can cloud computing help educators and students?

“Let me start by saying that I know that I don’t know all the ways it can help. In fact, I’m constantly surprised with how I see our software being used in education. But there are two things that come up again and again.

“Thanks to cloud computing students can study and connect with teachers or classmates from anywhere – at school, at home, or even out and about on mobile phones and devices. This means it can help extend education to where, and when, the student happens to be. Cloud computing also enables students to select their preferred learning style or learning modality. They can read online, watch videos of lectures, join discussion forums, work on shared documents – whatever suits the way they like to learn.”

What cloud programs does Microsoft offer educational institutions?

“Everything that we have offered before now has cloud equivalents. We even have a cloud-based operating system called Windows Azure. But we also offer some great educational software designed specifically for schools. Dreamspark, for example, lets students use our development tools to create their own software, and it’s linked to the Challenge Cup, →

a worldwide competition for student developers held every year.”

What about Live@edu?

“Live@edu is our current communication and collaboration offering for educational institutions. It came about because we realised that educational institutions liked the simplicity of our consumer services, but also needed the control of our commercial solutions – and it includes free email, document and sharing programs and messaging and conferencing tools.”

And how does Office 365 for education fit into this?

“Office 365 for education is the next generation of Live@edu. We’ve extended the elements in Live@edu to include SharePoint Online and other tools, such as Lync. It will launch this year and I know a lot of institutions are excited about it. We’ll migrate the service plan of institutions currently using Live@edu to Office 365 for education later in the year, and because it’s all cloud-based, customers won’t experience any disruption.”

How does Microsoft’s offer compare with someone like Google?

“I think there are two important things to consider here. Firstly, Microsoft has vast experience of supplying software to companies, which gives us a real understanding of the control and data security needed in educational organisations. In comparison, Google’s consumer-orientated software is lightweight and may struggle to reach the same level of duty of care that we supply.

“Also, Google makes money through advertising, but there are no adverts on its educational offering. This means it has no monetary

reason to keep educational organisations happy – or even to keep its educational offering updated. Our users, on the other hand, buy our services, so we work extremely hard to keep them happy. We would be materially impacted if we didn’t meet our customers’ needs.”

What advice would you give to schools looking to take advantage of cloud computing?

“Do your homework and get as much advice as possible. There are a lot of benefits to cloud computing, but it can mean big changes in how you work. These changes are positive, but you should be ready for them and not surprised by them.”

What’s next on the horizon for Microsoft’s educational wing?

“There are a million things in the pipeline, but I’m excited about bringing Kinect Motion Sensors into the mainstream through PCs. These are currently used in the Xbox and they track your movements so your whole body becomes the Xbox controller. They can also use voice and face recognition, and I think they could open up a whole new modality for students to engage in both in the classroom and through gaming-based learning.”