USING EDTECH TO BOLSTER DIGITAL LITERACY FROM A YOUNG AGE

The benefits of equipping children with essential digital literacy skills are countless.

Despite the advancement of technology permeating nearly every aspect of our lives, more than 11 million people in the UK lack basic digital skills, with one out of every 11 people completely avoiding the internet altogether. Although a House of Lords report, Growing Up With The Internet, argued back in 2017 that digital literacy "should be the fourth pillar of a child's education alongside reading, writing and mathematics", The Learning & Work Institute warned earlier this year that the UK is heading towards a catastrophic digital skills shortage.

As schools return for the new academic year, the education system continues to reel from the impact of the pandemic following months of disrupted learning and fears of another spike in infections. Beyond the immediate crisis, however, remain profound questions about what children learn, and the priorities of education. With digital literacy spanning every area of online life from safety and awareness through to problem solving and preparing for future careers, how can we galvanise lessons learned during lockdown and 'join the dots' in schools to foster digital citizenship skills?

Safety

Increasing numbers of young people around the world regularly use digital platforms, with children representing one in five internet users in the UK – making it more important than ever to protect them from and make aware of inappropriate or harmful content, cyber bullying or online scams. It's not about scaring children, but rather opening their eyes to the possible dangers posed by the online world.

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The Department for Education's (DfE) statutory guidance for schools and colleges on safeguarding now includes a dedicated online safety section: "The use of technology has become a significant component of many safeguarding issues... An effective approach to online safety empowers a school or college to protect and educate the whole school or college community in their use of technology and establishes mechanisms to identify, intervene in and escalate any incident where appropriate."

However, without dedicated systems in place, teachers, IT staff and safeguarding leads can struggle to keep tabs on each individual student's digital footprint. Integrated classroom management platforms can track activity across the whole school, with some even creating a risk index number and identifying vulnerable students to alert staff if there is any need for immediate action.

A joined-up approach

Unfortunately, online safety issues aren't confined to the school gates, with potential risks extending to students' home and family lives. It's key that schools work in partnership with parents and carers to protect students from online dangers and ultimately empower them with the tools needed to navigate the internet safely.

Some schools, such as Michaela Community School in north-west London (dubbed England's strictest school) even adopt a zero-tolerance ban on mobile phones, asking students to hand them in at the beginning of every day. Whilst this approach might not be for everyone (or me!), headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh highlights the variety of risks children can be exposed to, from grooming and radicalisation through to sexting or exploitation.

Whatever your school's individual policy, it's crucial that school staff, parents and families work in harmony to team up and ensure children are efficiently educated to know how to spot scams or potentially dangerous situations. There are many expert free guides available which encourage best practice by helping to highlight key trends and how they might impact students.

Beyond the classroom

It's also important to look forward to the benefits being digitally fluent can provide for children's futures. Digital literacy can and does move beyond the classroom, as many modern jobs now require a degree of digital competence. Increasingly popular jobs in digital marketing, software development, architecture and data analytics all demand high levels of digital fluency. The digital age wields great influence on the labour market as artificial intelligence (AI), biotech and other digital advances restructure work for many.

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Many employers are therefore seeking individuals with strong digital capabilities to take advantage of the new opportunities that are projected to arise from digital innovations. The DfE reported in 2019 that as many as one third of vacancies are difficult to fill due to a lack of sufficient digital skills amongst candidates, and a more recent survey by McKinsey revealed that 87% of business leaders say they either have or are anticipating serious skills shortages.

By embedding digital tools across everyday aspects of the curriculum and school life, children can gradually boost their proficiency to ensure they are confident and properly skilled once entering the world of work.

Digital Citizenship

Whilst skills are of course a huge driver for schools, with 8-18 year olds averaging nearly seven hours of screen time a day, the importance of good conduct online can't be neglected. Just as we encourage children to be good citizens in the real, 4D world, it's equally vital that we teach them to be responsible digital citizens whilst online. As the House of Lords report, Growing Up With The Internet, argues, "It is in the whole of society's interest that children grow up to be empowered, digitally confident citizens. This is a shared responsibility for everyone, it is essential that we improve opportunities for children to use the internet productively; improve digital literacy; change the norms of data collection and to design technology in ways that support children by default."

The benefits of equipping children with essential digital literacy skills are countless – from staying safe and critical thinking, through to social engagement and skills development, it's clear that today's young people need a lot more than just the '3 Rs' to be agile and thrive in the twenty first century.