

## Do We Really Have to 'Teach' Computers to Elementary Students?

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It never fails that at one time or another teachers are asked to teach a subject outside of their 'comfort' zone. In the case of technology, elementary teachers are forced to teach students how to use the computers while they themselves may have little or no knowledge about them.

Recently while flipping through the curriculum guidelines for Technology, I came to the realisation that while formal computers is not taught until high school, there are many tasks that elementary students are expected to perform. For example, students are expected to be able to prepare and print a word processing document; however keyboarding and other computer program instruction are not taught until high school. How can we expect students to use programs like word processing programs with little or no formal training? In order to set students up for success in their school careers, time in class needs to be devoted to teaching students the basics of computers and how to use the tools to complete their assignments. Therefore, more elementary teachers need to spend the time to teach computers as a subject.

There seems to be two problems that present themselves when we think about teaching computers as a subject. The first problem is lack of computer training among the teachers. I don't know about your school, but mine does not have the resources to hire a dedicated computer teacher (or network administrator for that matter), so computer instruction is left to the classroom teachers. For most teachers, they seem to rely on easy to run programmes that leave the actual teaching to the computer. At most, students are showed how to start programs and save information with little or no instruction on how to actually use the programs. Many times teachers still integrate technology into their curriculum simply by having students use a game like 3rd Grade Adventures during centre time.

The second problem is the fact that most teachers do not want to teach a computer class because they are intimidated by the fact that some of their students may know more about computers than they do. As a teacher, it is easier to simply rely on these students to peer-mentor the students who are not as competent in computers. By relying on these students, the teacher is relieved of the task of helping the students with their computer related issues.

It is important that students learn how to use computers in elementary school in order to effectively use the computer in high school. The question is where to start and how to find the resources to help.

I would start with the very basics in the primary grades. Things like mouse control, opening and closing programs and turning on the computer can be easily taught in the early primary grades simply by having students play games like Reader Rabbit etc. Younger students can also identify the major components of the computer like the monitor, keyboard, mouse, printer etc.

By the middle grades, students should be spending time using more advanced programs like Kid Pix and Hyperstudio. These programs are easy for the students to use and provide for forgiving experimenting (if they make a mistake it is easily corrected without altering the entire project). There are also many lesson plans available on the internet for both Kid Pix and Hyperstudio. In addition, both programs are easily used and understood by adults as the directions are written in primary language. Students in this level should also be learning how to type on the keyboard. This skill is essential when teachers are asking

students to type essays and research papers in the upper grades.

In Grades 6-8, students should be able to do basic research on the internet, work in word processing programs, spreadsheets, and presentation software, and communicate through email programs. When the students reach high school, these programs are invaluable tools for success. However, before the programs are taught, students need to know terminology and the different parts of the computer and their uses. It would also be beneficial for students to know how to plug in the various components, like the mouse, monitor, printer and keyboard. Finally a lot of time should be devoted to getting hands on practise with the programs that would be a key factor in the student's education success.

While these goals may seem overwhelming to a teacher who is not comfortable with computers, they are doable and even provide an opportunity for teachers to further their own learning. Perhaps a mentor system can be set up to assist teachers who experience difficulty. With help, even teachers who are not comfortable with computers can help their students become competent in computers and prepared for high school.