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Laptops in the Classroom

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With the growing number of primary school children finding that technology such as laptops and iPads are a standard part of their school day, Jessica Jane Sammut asks the question – are they a help or a hindrance?

It's a digital age. Technology is racing forward, and with it, the world is changing – but nowhere quite so much as in the classroom. As is the nature of momentum, the face of education is an evolving and ever-changing landscape, constantly appraised and improved upon to better help our children learn and grow. However, when there are changes being made in the name of progress, we must always be careful to step back and ask – IS this better? It's true we can't stand still, but we must always be sure that any kind of amendment to a learning method is a step forward and not a leap back. And in a modern terrain that is obsessed with quick results, the temptation to cut corners can be all too real. So is technology in the primary school classroom something to be embraced or something to be ejected?

HOW DO PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN LEARN?

"Students in primary school learn differently at different ages," says leading educator Nadia McCallum, who holds a Masters in Teaching and was recently awarded The Director General's Award for Excellence in Service to Public Education and Training.

"When children begin school, their learning is very play based. As students get older, they learn through discussion and experimentation. The common thread is that they learn by doing and interacting with others. Students need to interact and engage with what they are learning so that it is meaningful and therefore more likely to be remembered and transferred to other contexts."

"When we were at school, classrooms were focused on the teacher. Students sat passively, listened quietly, took notes and memorised facts. Today, classrooms are very different places. Classrooms have needed to move with the times. Teachers are preparing students for the future. Students are now required to think, question and generate independent thought from the moment they enter kindergarten."

So does technology help or hinder this approach? Are we dumbing down, or are we moving with the times?

THE PROS

Promotes independence and self-direction

In order to become lifelong learners, students need to develop the skills of research and inquiry, and this is where computers really excel. Today, a teacher's role is to guide students to find their own answers, rather than simply telling them the answer. This form of guided

inquiry happens from a very young age. Therefore, technology is a necessary tool if students are to be taught how to independently acquire such information.

"Computers allow students to be independent and self-directed in finding out their own answers," confirms Nadia. Jenny Atkinson, a primary school teacher with 30 years of experience, and now an education transition specialist and founder of Sparks Education Australia (www.sparkseducation.com.au), agrees. "Laptops in classrooms provide students with the opportunity to be more self-directed, with greater responsibility for their learning, whilst still under the overall direction of a teacher," Jenny confirms.

Offers immediate access to information and knowledge

Offering immediate access to information and resources, laptops in the classroom encourage students to be curious. "Such learning can provide greater access to the curriculum at an appropriate level to consolidate and advance a child's education, particularly for students with special needs," says Jenny. It also allows equal access to information for all students as they are not reliant on having the 'right' books at hand.

Creates a fun learning environment

With many educational games now available on the laptop and tablet, such technology can help make learning a source of fun, and the power of this can never be underestimated in terms of how children view schoolwork.

Games that promote maths and literacy are often loved by young children who don't even realise they are learning when playing them. Platforms such as [ABC's Reading Eggs](#) and [Mathseeds](#) are two such games that deeply connect with youngsters, enhancing their learning and nurturing their love of education. "Such games can motivate children to keep trying, because they want to get to the next level," explains Jenny. "This is particularly good for children who struggle with their work. This interest and motivation is difficult to replicate using worksheets."

Other less obvious games, such as [Minecraft](#), that don't have a clear learning goal at their core, can be equally as helpful in fostering and consolidating essential skills. "In order to play Minecraft effectively, students need a sound understanding of a broad range of mathematical concepts – numbers, area, time and money to mention a few, and need to be able to work with others in order to trade and build things, and plan ahead to meet targets," confirms Nadia.

"Children who are engaged and interested are more likely to learn and retain new learning," adds Jenny. "They are also more likely to persevere with tasks if they find them interesting. Many children are more motivated to complete work and be actively engaged in their learning with technology-based activities."

Encourages global connectivity

Students as young as five are now aware of a global world. Many students travel internationally before entering school. Others see the wider world via television shows and movies. Classrooms that reflect this global connectivity via the use of technology offer a way

to tap into it further. "It is not uncommon for students to email or Skype other students in different countries using their laptops," explains Nadia. "By making such connections, the knowledge they acquire becomes meaningful in a global context."

Promotes digital literacy

"Technology is so interwoven in how we operate in the wider world, that to restrict it would not be doing a child any favours," says Nadia. "Computers are integral to the workplace and are only becoming more so." It therefore makes sense that our children are exposed to technology as a tool for learning. It is reflective of how the 'real world' operates.

Like anything though, balance is key, and the use of technology should not replace active play or other skills that are learnt at school. It should merely complement or enhance such proficiencies. "The use of laptops in classrooms teaches students to use, differentiate and examine/analyse information in a way that is current," confirms Jenny. "It prepares children for their participation in the digital world."

Provides contextual learning

The opportunity for children to participate in their learning and find a context for their theoretical knowledge is far greater with the use of technology. Children are better able to understand the value of what they are learning which means they are more likely to retain the learning.

Encourages higher order thinking

"Laptops can help a student think more widely, especially when they are given a choice as to how they will present their learning/findings," says Jenny. They allow young students to think 'outside the square', providing access to a variety of tools for presenting knowledge, which only serves to complement the more traditional aspects of a learning structure.

Supplements learning

Laptops in the classroom can be used as a tool to supplement learning: for example, a child might write a story on paper, edit it and then publish it with a laptop. More skills are being learnt than if the technology was not available.

THE PERILS

Encourages multi-tasking mania and distraction

Research has shown that multi-tasking can decrease performance and overall comprehension. Further to this, multi-tasking on a computer not only distracts the user, but can also distract those around them. Dealing with this issue effectively essentially comes down to the teacher in the classroom however.

"If a teacher is employing regular checks with students and making them accountable for the progress they are making, they are more likely to attend to the task at hand," explains Nadia.

"Children have the potential to be distracted by other programs/activities on a laptop. Good classroom management/monitoring by a teacher is therefore essential," Jenny concurs.

Provides access to inappropriate content

As we know, it is very easy for children to access the wrong kind of content on the internet, and this is a common concern for parents. Some schools provide digital devices to students where the devices stay at school and are protected by the school Wi-Fi restrictions and filters. Other schools implement the BYOD ('Bring Your Own Device') strategy where students can bring a device from home.

"The danger with parents providing the devices is that, unless each device is configured to adhere to settings that protect the device from accessing adult content or prevent the device from having games downloaded onto it, a child's school laptop might expose children to inappropriate material," says cyber safety expert, Leonie Smith (www.cybersafetylady.com.au).

"Some families are tech savvy and have parental controls set up on their child's device, but the majority of families do not. More education needs to happen around these devices as to what controls and filters can be enabled to lessen the risk of exposure to improper content if technology is to be a standard part of the school day."

Depletes learning time

"Learning time can be wasted when technical issues arise, such as login dramas, short battery life or the internet going offline," warns Jenny. All can deplete learning time. It's the unexpected nature of laptop problems that can create issues in the classroom, and even if teachers do have a back-up activity, it is often not their first choice of learning experience. It is therefore vital that laptops are up to date and reliable.

Creates a school/home technology use imbalance

Some children may already spend too much time on technology at home. "Health concerns such as eyestrain or posture problems can be an issue for these children," says Jenny. It can therefore be problematic to ensure there is a good balance of technology use between home and school, especially as this varies so much from one home (and classroom) to the next.

Creates an over-reliance on tools

Do laptops encourage laziness in children? Perhaps. With tools such as automatic spell and grammar check, children can become apathetic about using their brains. "Teachers need to teach children how to use such tools appropriately in an educationally beneficial manner and also to understand their limitations," reminds Jenny.

Replaces traditional learning

Technology is not the only tool available in learning and children should know this. "Laptops and other technology should not replace the teacher's effort in a classroom nor should they

replace any other learning experience," says Jenny. And this is the concern – that they might. Technology needs to be viewed as one tool amongst many other educational tools available to assist children with their learning.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

"Teachers need to be aware of both the benefits and drawbacks of using technology in the classroom so that they can provide balanced opportunities for learning that both engage children and promote a lifelong love of learning," says Jenny.

HOW CAN WE HELP OUR CHILDREN?

"The best way for parents to support this type of learning is to be involved with their children," advises Nadia. "Parents don't have to completely understand the technology their kids are using, but need to understand enough to know the value of what their children are doing and if there is anything that might be a potential issue. If parents are unsure, they should speak to their child's teacher."

WHAT PARENTS SAY

"We're preparing children for a future we can't even imagine. We are educating them for careers and jobs that don't even exist yet. I believe to do this successfully they need to have a diverse range of skills that promote flexibility and ongoing learning and we should be encouraging a desire to seek out information. Being at the forefront of technology in schools, I believe, is one of the ways to prepare our children for whatever the future holds." ~ *Melanie McNiven, Noosa*

"I strongly support the use of any computer devices in the classroom alongside the traditional methods of learning. Both my eldest boys have had delayed speech and my middle one suffers from language delay and impaired learning. Traditional reading and writing does not work well for them. Their school uses many forms of learning. I know a lot of the computer work involves logging on to specific sites such as Bug Club, Reading Eggs and Mathletics. They are also encouraged to use their laptops as a resource to look up items or information." ~ *Caroline Thompson, Doonan*

Written by

Jessica Jane Sammut

[Jessica Jane Sammut](#) is the Group Digital Editor of Mother Goose Media, as well as being a leading writer, editor and journalist for national media and high profile global brands for nearly 10 years. A former London commercial lawyer, Jessica is now living her zen-life in Noosa with her tribe of boys, spending her days in the surf and nights on the deck of her palm-inspired shack. Connect with Jessica on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#) #JJS

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