KEY DIGITAL SKILLS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND

Catherine Elliott shares the importance of teaching key digital and digital literacy skills, and looks at how you can build them with your students

Computing curricula generally cover a wide range of skills, concepts, and knowledge, and much of the focus is often on creative projects, programming, and abstract computer science concepts. There is a strong argument, however, for ensuring that the basic skills are taught well in the first instance, with a particular benefit for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Basic digital skills are any skills that are required to access and use a computer effectively. The concept of 'digital natives' has been widely discredited, but many teachers believe that young people just 'get' computers and can use them with ease, as they are more confident users. However, although children may be experts at swiping and accessing content on certain devices, such as tablets, they often lack keyboard and mouse skills, and the understanding of the basics of an operating system.

Basic digital literacy is equally important. The skills and knowledge required to communicate effectively and use current and emerging technologies are essential if students are to remain safe and act appropriately online. Young people with additional learning needs and disabilities can be among the most vulnerable in terms of online risks and behaviours.

Why is developing fluency in basic digital skills and literacy important?

1. It reduces cognitive load

Cognitive load relates to the number of items a person can hold in their working memory. For many younger pupils and students with SEND, basic skills such as logging on and opening files are not practised enough to be moved to long-term memory, and therefore rely on working memory to be completed. This results in the frustrating position of a child spending much of a lesson simply accessing a computer and finding work. Once these actions become fluent, they can concentrate on the content of the lesson more effectively.

2. It increases confidence in using technology

Once learners become fluent in using the computer in basic ways, their confidence will develop. This will help to increase motivation in lessons and contribute to a feeling of achievement.

3. It enables learners to use assistive technologies effectively and make simple modifications to content to support learning

Mainstream applications and devices now have a greater amount of assistive technology built in — for example, Immersive Reader in Office 365, Voice Typing in Google Docs, and Speak Screen on the iPad. If young people can be taught how to use these options independently as part of computing lessons, it will help them to become more effective in their learning. Similarly, highlighting how to increase the size of text or change the background colour in documents will allow learners to modify digital documents to be more accessible.

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4. Digital skills open up greater opportunities for employment

There are few jobs where digital skills are not required, and even the application process generally requires some element of using technology. For students not taking an IT or computer science qualification, schools need to consider how to teach key