Embrace the right tech for the early years

The Government’s revised kindergarten curriculum is a model for equipping the young with emphasis on children’s holistic development, learning through play and ensuring that they begin to develop the 21st-century competencies that they will need as Singaporeans and global citizens.

As we prepare today’s learners for tomorrow’s world, it is important to acknowledge that some of the necessary skills include using technology. The curriculum framework notes a role for technology in the kindergarten classroom and that technology should be used in a developmentally appropriate manner and complement — not substitute — concrete activities like art and crafts or outdoor play.

However, the use of technology by young children is a fraught topic. Many view it as a particularly pernicious form of electronic babysitting, turning children into passive consumers of images and say that there has no place in educational settings. According to this view, the early childhood classroom is a peaceful haven from a hectic world that is connected 24/7.

However, precisely because technology is such an all-encompassing feature of modernity, to ignore it in educational settings misses the reality of the lives of most children, who are surrounded by it outside of school.

Singapore has by far the highest Internet penetration and use in the region, reaching 97 per cent for 15- to 19-year-olds, and it is the global leader in the use of non-computer devices such as tablets to access information.

In this context, it is important that we develop ways for young children to become competent users of technology.

TOOLS TO EXPAND HORIZONS

Among the many benefits of using technology with young children is that it allows students access to information that may not have been previously accessible.

So, for example, we would always prefer to take students for a hike instead of watching a nature film on their devices. But using a tool like Google Earth, students can look at different views of the area where they went for their hike and generate conversations and questions about landscape, perspective or maps.

In addition, instead of students becoming passive consumers of content, technology can allow them to become active producers of content even at an early age.

Consider a common task for preschoolers: Writing their own stories. This important exercise allows them to express themselves through language and drawing, work through the intricacies of spelling and expand their vocabularies.

Paper-and-pencil offers many possibilities for this. But software technology, Programmes like Storybook Maker allow children to upload their drawings, insert sound or video clips and “read” their story, record a narration of the text and include a sidebar where a trained teacher can insert notes for parents about what milestones the child is achieving through the work.

TRAIN THE TEACHERS TOO

As we introduce technology to students of all ages, including our youngest learners, we should understand how we train the teachers to use suitable technologies rather than shun them, to apply technological resources in ways that are most conducive to learning and to work with parents on what is suitable in terms of both time and tools.

Parents are going to continue to provide their children with technology and students are going to be engaged with their devices. Pre-school teachers thus have a vital role to play in working with both the students and the parents. They can devise developmentally appropriate activities with technology, they can offer families guidance on how to evaluate the quality of new programmes and apps.

Perhaps most importantly, they can model the most appropriate uses and context for technology — showing children, for example, that meal or book time is when they interact with others, not devices. In short, teachers can and should be guides through the digital landscape where children and families now reside.

While concrete skills, social interaction, play and getting children excited about learning should always be the focus of the curriculum in early years, using the proper technological resources and strategies can enhance a child’s learning, through both access to knowledge and the opportunity to demonstrate vital skills.

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