

Error 404: school coders not found

It was in 2009 that government transparency campaigner and digital activist Emma Mulqueeny began to realise the extent of problems with the teaching of computing in our schools. An organiser of 'hack days' for programmers to create tools to make use of open government data, she decided to run a special hack day for young people to harness the energy of Britain's young coders.

A venue was found at Google's UK headquarters, to guarantee excitement and a big turn-out. But on the day, only two people turned up.

Horrified, she began to build her own network and the Young Rewired State event managed to attract 50 people in 2010 and 100 last year. But when one of the young people carried out some research into where these kids had learned to code, without exception they said they were self-taught.

As a parent herself, Mulqueeny says she already had her suspicions: one of her own kids had "spent two terms in ICT class manipulating a puppy in Photoshop".

This far, everybody in the world of technology agrees: ICT teaching in Britain's schools, while recognised as a core subject, has been allowed to slip so low in quality that universities looking to take on people for computer science courses are reportedly ignoring whether or not they have ICT at GCSE or 'A' level. Poor courses were being made still worse by outdated teaching: in subjects like English or history, it matters little if teachers have not been retrained for a few decades: in ICT, a year is a very long time.

Education secretary Michael Gove's acceptance of the dire and urgent situation came as a relief to the digital sector. But fears remain that he has simply stripped away what currently exists and replaced it with a hope that positive innovation will follow.

The Royal Society report 'Shut down or restart?: The way forward for computing in UK schools' does suggest a few ways to fill the gaps, such as a framework to support more meaningful computer science teaching in schools. Something will certainly have to be funded to help schools where understanding of computing is not a strength, and it is now incumbent on all sectors with a vital interest in this debate, from the technology companies who want to hire the home-grown coders of the future to government, schools and parents, to respond to the government's consultation exercise and urge that meaningful long-term action is taken.

Everyone is keen to get the benefits of a digital society: it just seems like we all forgot that someone, somewhere, has to code it.

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