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## Hey, teacher. Teach those kids to code!



by Nigel Bowen

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*The recent Review of the Australian Curriculum has missed an opportunity to digitally upskill the next generation.*

Move over French, German and Mandarin because there's a new language Australian students should be learning: the language of technology. In an age where everything from your light bulbs to your watch is hooked up to the web and runs computer code, it's not unreasonable to assume the next generation should be able to 'speak' programming languages in the same way previous generations were taught useful skills such as woodwork or home economics.

It's no longer even a particularly revolutionary idea. In September, both primary and secondary school students in England had mandatory computer classes added to their curriculum. Around 20,000 teachers in the US currently deliver coding classes to their students and Estonia teaches children as young as six to write code that can form the foundation of computer and smartphone apps.

In contrast, Australian students can elect to take an information and communications technology subject in their final two years of high school, but most will leave school without being taught to write a single line of code – a situation that has the local tech industry incensed. "In 20 years' time we are going to heavily regret the fact that we did nothing about it," Atlassian co-founder Mike Cannon-Brookes told the *Australian Financial Review* earlier this year.

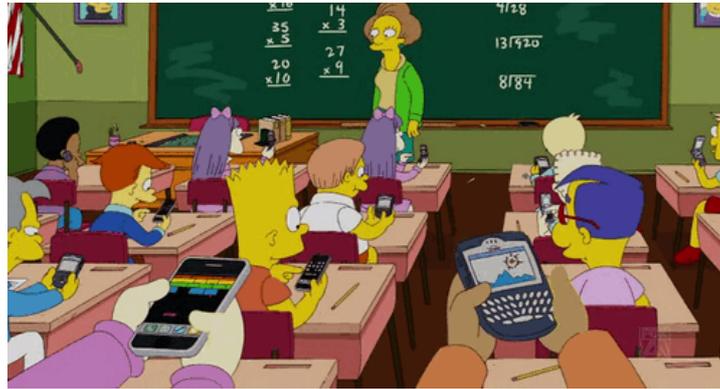
There had been hope a federal government review of the national curriculum would result in the introduction of mandatory coding classes in Australian schools. Instead, the review, which was released in October, sat on the fence, stating that there was "a significant division of opinion, and little common agreement, as to what the curriculum of this subject area should contain". Students should only be introduced to a 'digital technologies' subject from year 9, the review recommended. But when children can navigate an iPad before they can walk and talk, that's a baffling conclusion to reach.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in the government's thinking is this: that digital technologies, computer science, information technology – whatever you want to call it – is a niche set of skills to be set apart from the rest of the educational experience. To paraphrase the late Steve Jobs, kids should be learning how to program a computer because it teaches them how to think. In writing code, children are developing many of the same skills that will come in useful when they are studying more traditional subjects, such as science, maths or English.

But even if the federal or state governments mandated the teaching of code tomorrow, we'd still face the issue of who was going to teach it. According to figures from the Australian Council for Education and Research, 58 per cent of ICT teachers in years 7-10 and 48 per cent in years 11-12 were not qualified to teach their students to code. In the short term, the only option would be to look outside the education system for expertise and enlist the likes of Google, Apple and Facebook to pass on coding knowledge. After all, it's these tech companies who will most benefit from having a steady stream of code-savvy graduates entering the job market.

Professor John Naughton, writing for *The Guardian* back in 2012, noted that by withholding programming knowledge from our children in what is now a digital world, we're short-changing them, relegating them to being mere consumers in a world where they can experience the magic of technology, but not create any of that magic themselves.





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