The computing curriculum is ‘forcing an entire country to learn programming’

From a policy studies perspective, it provides clear evidence that the school curriculum is not just in the hands of government. It represents control of the curriculum by Google, culturally resourced by the BBC, bankrolled by Microsoft and financed by Facebook, and a massive cash cow for Codecademy, whose chief executive has been quoted in the Guardian saying “we’ve struck oil” as the computing curriculum is “forcing an entire country to learn programming”.

Although learning to code classes teach useful knowledge about how computers work, the computing curriculum is worryingly absent of critical attention to the coding companies that make computers work. When a founding director of Code Club spoke up against the ‘corporate mass surveillance’ techniques of Google in 2014, she was forced to resign: Google is Code Club’s main commercial sponsor. This corporate culture now has a powerful position within the computing curriculum through the provision of resources, materials and professional training. The school curriculum is always a selection from culture, defining what knowledge and skills are considered desirable for the next generation. But the computing curriculum has become a selection from the commercial culture of its sponsors and providers. Classes in learning to code need to be accompanied by lessons that teach young people how to critique the corporate culture of code.

Concerns have been voiced about teachers’ capacity for the new subject. However, professional support is being provided by Google and Microsoft through funding for teacher-training resources. The BBC is also supporting the computing curriculum through its Make It Digital campaign, including the distribution of a million free handheld programming devices to children in the first year of secondary school. The ‘Micro Bit’ enables children to carry out simple coding tasks and has been supported with technical development and teacher training materials from Microsoft. It seems that politicians, the commercial tech sector, and public bodies have all come together around learning to code, and in five years transformed it into a major education policy event.

Who is benefiting most from computer coding being part of the National Curriculum?

THE IDEA THAT YOUNG people should learn to code computer technologies has become part of the National Curriculum for schools in England. Yet as research for the Code Acts in Education project at the University of Stirling shows, it is driven by unquestioned commercial technology interests. The pace at which learning to code has proceeded into national government education policy is astonishing. Only since 2010, reports promoting programming in school have been produced by organisations including Computing at School, the Royal Society, Nesta, and the Design Commission. New coding start-ups have become established, such as Code Club and CoderDojo, which organise volunteer-led coding classes in thousands of after-school settings, while providers such as Codecademy have delivered coding courses to millions online.

At the same time, big technology businesses including Google, Facebook and Microsoft have lobbied to establish computing as a specialist subject in schools. The Hour of Code was launched in 2013 by Silicon Valley ‘angel investors’ with multi-million dollar donations from Google and Microsoft, plus public endorsements by ‘tech celebrities’ such as Mark Zuckerberg. It has since served 127 million students worldwide. The UK even had its own Year of Code in 2014, headed by technology entrepreneurs from Index Ventures, including a former advisor to David Cameron. The language of tech entrepreneurship seems to be flowing through the fibre-optic network of the internet from Silicon Valley to Whitehall, and from there into schools. After scrapping the subject ICT, the Department for Education introduced new computing programmes of study in 2014 that embed programming in the National Curriculum for every child in England aged three and up (it’s also in Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence).

OPINION
CODING CULTURE
By Ben Williamson

Ben Williamson is a Lecturer on the Initial Teacher Education programme.

codeactsineducation.wordpress.com