Gaining real-world experience from inside the classroom

With the resources available these days, there are more and more ways to teach subjects like computing effectively in the classroom. But it's not until students connect with real industry experts, that they realise the potential of what can be achieved with computing and where it can lead.
Simon Reid, head of computing and e-learning at Stratford Girls' Grammar School, explains how working alongside these professionals gave students a confidence boost while they gained valuable insight into the working world, and developed real business skills.

A short while ago, most children were equipped with basic ICT skills. However, with the recent spotlight on coding and digital skills, there's an incredible amount of resources available for teachers to use in the classroom to engage students while also developing a much wider set of skills.

When I first joined Stratford Girls' Grammar, I wanted to invest in a creative project for the Year 9 girls that wasn't purely academic and exam focused; I was looking for a project that appealed to all abilities, and gave them a real understanding of the skills they could utilise in years to come. Having carried out a great deal of research, I found the Apps for Good course which provides students with an opportunity to think both strategically and creatively, in order to come up with a concept that solves a real societal problem, and develop it into an app.

Additionally, it requires students to become entrepreneurial thinkers; they have to design a process from start to finish, which includes conducting market research, drafting business plans and pitching their app ideas. I explain at the beginning that they will get out of it as much as they put in, so it's down to each group to gather all the information they'll need to create their designs.
Suddenly, they realise that they aren't going to be handed the background research to get them

started; they have to work together as no one else is going to do it for them. It certainly gives them a sense of ownership and motivates them to set their sights on the end goal.

As part of the course, students have the opportunity to work with an industry expert or business professional, to provide them with insight into the real world. For them, being able to receive feedback on the feasibility of their product, or how it could actually work in the hands of users, is so valuable. I have found that it's by far the most engaging element of the programme. The excitement of going to visit organisations, seeing technology companies in action and speaking to professionals really motivates them and opens their eyes to the opportunities that await them at the end of their educational journey.

For the students to be able to gain first-hand experience of what it's like to work in an incredibly successful tech company, or be involved in a huge product development project, gives them a real buzz. It's all about speaking to real people about real problems, getting feedback and then coming up with the ideas to solve the problem.

All our teams did incredibly well, but there was one team that particularly stood out; they really got on board with the project and turned their concept into a reality.
Alex, Emily, Josie and Katie were in Year 9 when they began the Apps for Good course. On researching the LGBTQ community they discovered there were no advice and support

resources available for young people. With this in mind, the concept for *'I'm Okay'* was born — a platform providing access to helplines and resources, as well as a dictionary of terminology and database of user stories.

At the end of the course, there is also the opportunity to enter the Apps for Good national competition. As part of this, students have to create, record and submit an elevator pitch to sell their idea.

Their market research and presentation skills really shone through. They had a strong idea and, having developed this throughout the process, had the knowledge and belief in their product. The team were nominated as finalists, and after presenting their ideas to a judging panel of industry professionals, they won their category.

The whole process not only taught them essential skills in coding, but also expertise that can be utilised in the real world. It gave them the confidence to talk to CEOs and directors from big organisations without even batting an eyelid! Being able to communicate with people, picking up the phone and talking to strangers, and putting together and presenting a pitch, are all valuable skills that will benefit them enormously in the years to come.

The *'I'm Okay'* team have now had their app professionally developed, and it's currently live on Google Play, with over 500 downloads. They're still going strong and have since won a Tech4Good award and have been featured in The Guardian, as well as on BBC radio.

Courses like Apps for Good open students' minds and allow them to realise the potential that is awaiting them when they leave education. Having access to people in the industry gives students the confidence boost they need to develop essential business skills and expertise that can be used in the classroom and beyond. For more information see www.appsforgood.org