

“Learning Computer Skills”, Book 1,2,3, by T.P.S. Jassal and H.K. Jassal, Madhuban Educational Books, Rs. 24,28,30. (1995).

“Philately for the Young”, by Mathew Varki, Children’s Book Trust, Rs. 45. (1996).

“Call of the Ocean”, by T. Prakshirajan, Children’s Book Trust, Rs. 34. (1996).

The computer revolution, or more precisely the PC revolution has brought about a fundamental change in which we interact with our environment. The ubiquitous computer touches almost all aspects of our existence, either in an obvious way of railway reservation systems or in a hidden way as inside many of the gadgets that we use around the house, like a stereo music system or a television.

Some years ago, computers were introduced in the school curriculum also. For the most part, the teaching of computers at the primary and even the secondary school level has been pathetic. The curriculum itself has been designed in a most unimaginative way, with a tremendous amount of information but almost no application to the students’ environment. The actual teaching of the subject is dismal; with limited amount of computers and a fundamental mistrust of the capabilities of students led to computers being mostly taught in the classroom with almost no practical training on the machines. Of course, even this was only limited to the few elite schools in the metropolitan cities.

The set of books(there are a set of 6 books) on Learning Computer Skills aims at teaching the student about the use of computers at different levels. Book 1 is designed for 7-9 year olds, Book 2 for 8-10 and Book 3 for 9-11 year olds. The introductory book is primarily for familiarization with the computer itself. It has a very reader friendly description of the various components of a computer and their functions. The authors then go onto introduce LOGO, a computer language developed by the Seymour Papert with inspiration from Piaget. The idea behind LOGO is to provide an environment in which powerful ideas may be explored by children in a visual and concrete fashion before they learn about them in a verbal and more abstract way. Thus, LOGO has little to do with computers per se (apart from using them for implementation) but is a much wider pedagogical tool. Unfortunately, in most schools, LOGO is still all that the children get exposed to for a long time when they learn about computers. This is in my opinion an out-dated concept. With the rapid development of multimedia and now even the Internet, there are a host of wonderful and attractive tools available for children to be introduced to computers. LOGO has a role to play in pedagogy, but it certainly isn’t one for introducing computers today.

Book 2 of the series is a more detailed exposition of LOGO. All the relevant concepts of LOGO are explained well in this and there many exercises to explore the subject. There is also an introduction to DOS (the Disk Operating System from Microsoft) with some of the elementary commands as well as a very brief introduction to the hardware. The purpose of introducing microprocessors, ALU, RAM, ROM , BIOS, registers etc. to a nine year old is somewhat unclear. Book 3 is mostly devoted to the development of a computer language called BASIC. This is language which is extremely easy to learn and is reasonably powerful to be able to perform most of the operations that one needs form a computer. I think the teaching of BASIC at such an early age is something which should be encouraged because if the students get exposed to a computer language early in, they can put the computers to more effective use in the secondary classes.

The series of books are very clearly written in an easy to follow style, though the production is rather drab with black and white line drawings and an unimaginative integration of graphic and text.(There is also a curious aside of the price of each book increasing as the level goes up!) Students and teachers will find

the books useful though as the authors themselves say, the efficacy of these books without extensive hands on work on the computer will be rather limited. Even in this day of channel surfing and cartoon network, stamp collecting is still a hobby which fascinates many children. Unfortunately, as the author of "Philately for the Young" says in his preface, most children never graduate from stamp collecting to philately, which is a rather serious in depth study of stamps. This involves not only collecting stamps but also studying about their designing, printing and history. From the "Penny Black" of 1840 to the well produced multi colored specimens of today, stamps are an excellent chronicle of recent human history. "Philately for the Young" is an excellent introduction to this fascinating hobby. Starting with a history of postage stamps, the book describes the various steps which go into the production of a stamp together with an interesting section on errors and withdrawals. The complete process of collecting stamps (acquiring them from the Philately Bureau or from other collectors) , taking care of them, identifying them and exhibiting them is given in a very lucid fashion. There is an extensive glossary and also a detailed World Identifier which allows one to identify the stamps from different countries. The quality of production is superb with very good printing of stamps though almost exclusively Indian. It is a book which will make an excellent present for a child who wants to be initiated into this hobby which President Roosevelt once said ".....enlarges our vision, broadens our knowledge and makes us better citizens...".

Did you know that the highest mountain range in the world is the Mid-Atlantic ridge in the Gulf of Mexico? Or that the Tilapia fish lays eggs in the male's mouth who is then obliged to keep his mouth closed till the eggs hatch! Or that the shark has a remarkable sense of smell and hearing and has a skeleton made entirely out of cartilage! These are some of the interesting nuggets of information in the " Call of the Ocean", a book which describes the world of water on our planet. The book has a lot of information about the formation of oceans, the early evolution of life, the economic potential of oceans as well as a fairly detailed account of the different types of animals and plants found in water. The book tries to survey a very broad field and hence sometimes the information on a particular topic is too sketchy to be of any use. There are also peculiar statements like Kovalam beach being the second most beautiful beach in the world!!!! The line drawings are also not very attractive, which is unfortunate, since in any book primarily for children, it is crucial that the book is attractively produced. Nevertheless, the book has a lot of information which will be of interest to young children.