

Boosting reading with a box

With so many kids glued to their computers and TVs, books need a new image to compete! **Lesley Fisher** explains how hand-held computers and reading software have boosted reading in her school.

As teachers we are all too aware of the worrying downturn of young people's attitudes towards reading. It is becoming increasingly apparent that fewer school children enjoy reading for pleasure – instead our digital native generation have taken a liking to computer games and online social networking sites. The national trend of young boys disliking reading and also finding the task a difficult one compared with their female counterparts is a regular conversation in staff rooms nationwide.

Here at Godmanchester Community Primary School we are now using Accelerated Reader™ software on the Neo handheld computer from Renaissance Learning. We are working avidly to ensure that our students reap the joys of reading and learning through discovery. We are highly aware of the positive relationship that exists between reading practice and academic achievement therefore we have implemented daily literacy practice that is relevant and targeted to the needs of the individual. We use regular feedback to inform students of their progress and also for our teaching staff to tailor their teaching methods to the needs of their classes.

As a community school based in rural Cambridgeshire, we cater for 420 four to 11 year olds. With a team of 17 teachers and 14 assistants we aim to make every effort to

meet the individual needs of each student. We currently stand in the top quartile of schools with less than eight per cent of pupils having free school meals, special educational needs and English as a foreign language (EFL).

Previously it was evident at our school that many of our pupils lacked the motivation to read and write. They had no real concern for discovering new vocabulary or exploring their creativity through words. Too often we saw that our boys struggled with the skills of reading and writing. At times it was not due to a lack of academic talent or intelligence, they just had too many thoughts and ideas in their minds and could not express them quickly enough on paper. This was causing personal frustration and exasperation in the classroom – something we needed to address for the good of our students' long-term academic and personal success.

As a school that places great importance on providing stimulating and interesting activities to inform and challenge its pupils, we were looking for solutions that gave a truly personalised approach to learning whilst also providing teaching staff with feedback that could help them tailor their pedagogical delivery. Group work is a daily occurrence at Godmanchester, therefore we were looking for technologies that allowed for collaborative working – but also gave each student the opportunity to work individually.

How does the software work?

Godmanchester, looking to advance literacy standards rolled out a new form of innovative reading software that would allow children to practice their literacy skills set at their own literacy level. Through the engaging quizzes



offered by the reading software, students are able to test their knowledge and understanding of a book's content. The reading software is highly appealing and caters for all ages at our school. Teachers benefit too - they can create customised reading schemes to suit the needs of each student. They can select books that are challenging, yet specific to the needs of each student so that frustration and monotony do not arise. Literacy skill development and range of vocabulary can also be effectively monitored.

Keen to optimise the school's resources and ICT availability for the pupils, we purchased a number of portable writing tools to place on each child's desk. Prior to this, computer access in the classroom was limited and affected student work completion times. To be able to use ICT on a daily basis and not have to wait for the classroom's computers allows each child a distinctly personalised approach to learning.

With young children at our school we were also looking for ICT that suited their needs. Our pupils are able to participate in a number of writing tasks, be they group or individually based. They can move the portable writing tools around the classroom with ease and work in groups if they wish. This has allowed for very productive lessons and the children have been eager to express their creativity. No longer do I hear moans in my classroom; my students are not scared to try and type their essays or answers amongst their peers, something they were anxious of when completing a pen and paper writing exercise.

Developing IT Skills

The primary school generation, now known as the 'digital generation,' can express their thoughts and show off their creative writing skills simply on a standard 'QWERTY' keyboard.

Teaming the school's reading software with the portable writing devices allows for our students to read a book of their choice from the school library and then complete a quiz to assess their knowledge and comprehension of the book's content. Including an array of styles of questions, the quizzes are fun and encourage enthusiasm to complete the task and results in enjoyment.

The school has reaped numerous benefits from adopting a whole school reading culture through modern technologies. Teaming our reading and writing strategies with new technologies have resulted in fantastic achievements; our students have been at the heart of this success. The ability

to be creative and transfer these thoughts onto the portable word processors has really inspired and motivated our boys to read and write. Independent tasks such as writing a poem can be completed or they can work collaboratively with their peers through the Infrared link. Teaching has become increasingly efficient and student-focused. No longer are we reliant on the use of paper and pens. Our lessons are totally tech-savvy.

With new found confidence, our students often tell us their views on the reading and writing tasks they complete on a day-to-day basis. A nine-year-old student said: "At Godmanchester we read a book then take a test on it, and score points. There are higher levels for the more advanced reader and lower levels for people who struggle. We used to have to queue up to take tests on the computer but, now we can do them at our desks which minimises time wasting so we have more time to do what matters, such as reading or typing."

Our books are all beginning to wear out with the sheer amount of reading that our students now complete. This is an amazing transformation in student commitment and enthusiasm to read.

Touch typing skills have also advanced dramatically. At the start of the day all students complete a short five minute typing task. We now have 11 children in Year 6 who type 85 words per minute. This I see as a real testament to our work, with the average computer user's

touch typing speed reported to be 35-40 words per minute. "Being able to practice our touch typing is great for later on in our lives," explained a student. "Also, being able to type quickly means that when we have to write long pieces of writing it is done in no time at all."

Extending the boundaries of learning

Children are allowed to use the writing devices and reading programmes at lunch. They can practice their typing skills, complete further quizzes or create short stories whenever they wish. This desire to continue learning outside of lesson time shows the birth of new students; self-directed learners highly committed to succeeding through additional learning outside of the classroom.

A recent visit to the school library by the Year 4 pupils astounded the librarian. Our librarian was bowled over by the knowledge and depth of discussion that our pupils could hold about their favourite books, authors and styles of writing. The Year four discussed authors such as Phillip Pullman, Anne Fine and Michael Moore Pervo.

The cross-curricular writing strategies embraced by Godmanchester have also benefited the teaching staff. Feedback is now instant - our reading software instantly prints out a report showing how well pupils have performed. Class progress can be monitored, but it also proves to be highly rewarding for our students,





as individual feedback allows them to ascertain how they are doing with regards to their weekly, termly and yearly goals.

Home access and progress reports for parents are also high on the agenda at Godmanchester. Through Home Connect, parents can log in from the comfort of their own homes to view their child's reading progress at school. They can opt for an email report to be sent immediately after the child completes a reading quiz. The report provides parents with an overview of their child's interest in reading, for example, the types of books read and the authors' names. Parent's evenings are much better informed as a result of these email reports. Teacher-parent discussions are increasingly thorough and prove to be more helpful for all concerned.

Ofsted success

A notable achievement at Godmanchester is our recent Ofsted report. Very impressed by pupils' knowledge and passion for reading and writing, the inspectors praised the use of new technologies and the whole school reading ethos. We received the following Ofsted

comment: "A great strength of the school is its readiness to embrace new initiatives and nowhere is this more evident than in the curriculum. The innovative uses of cross-curricular writing strategies, on-line testing monitoring and home access are just some of the examples that have made a significant impact on pupils' achievement."

When commenting specifically on the writing strategies used at Godmanchester, Ofsted added: "Full stops and capital letters get remembered and the quality of the writing is lifted as students concentrate more on the success criteria rather than on their laboured handwriting."

Further recognition of our school's dedication to advancing literacy standards amongst our pupils arrived in March 2009. Awarded Model School status by our reading programme provider, we are the first of 2,500 schools in the UK (using the reading software) to be recognised for our longstanding efforts and outstanding achievements. We are thrilled by this recognition of our hard work. The whole school, be they

pupils, teachers or assistants, have worked avidly to create a passion for reading and writing and this award, combined with our recent Ofsted report, is the icing on the cake.

In the modern day schools must embrace the numerous opportunities that new technologies present, if they are to offer their students a thorough and well-rounded education. With the right tools, perseverance and dedication schools, just like Godmanchester, can experience an improvement in student literacy levels and whole school academic success.

Lesley Fisher is the literacy co-ordinator at Godmanchester Community Primary School, Cambridgeshire. The school uses Accelerated Reader™ and NEO 2 from Renaissance Learning. For more information visit renlearn.co.uk



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