



Beatrix Potter School

Extending the classroom walls at Beatrix Potter Primary School – what would Peter Rabbit say?

For a school with an 80-year history and strong connections to a certain children's author, Beatrix Potter Primary School, is ahead of the curve when it comes to new ways of learning. The school, based in South-West London and under the authority of the London Borough of Wandsworth, is one of handful of schools in the UK currently conducting pilot projects using mobile technology – known as Anytime Learning. The aim – to examine how handheld computers can benefit a child's learning through a highly personalised approach.

"I immediately got it! This was what personalised learning was about and I could see how a device like this would bring so many benefits to kids inside and outside the classroom. In fact, the classroom didn't really matter, because this was about breaking down traditional boundaries and extending the learning and teaching process beyond anything we had been able to do previously."

Steph Neale,
Beatrix Potter School.

The 272-pupil school considers itself extremely IT literate and one that has actively taken advantage of the benefits that technology can bring to the learning, and teaching, process. "We've been using IT for around 20 years, but when the Government recently started talking about this thing called 'personalised learning', it didn't really ring any bells," explains Headteacher, Steph Neale.

When Simon Elledge of Roehampton University, a longstanding contact of the school, visited with the latest SmartPhone handheld computer, Mr Neale saw its potential to provide each child with an individual way of learning. The SmartPhone v1615, incorporating Windows Mobile 6, Microsoft Office, GPS and Internet access via the 3G network, is packed with a range of functionality including video, camera and audio recording capabilities.

Personalised learning

As Mr Neale explains: "I immediately got it! This was what personalised learning was about and I could see how a device like

this would bring so many benefits to kids inside and outside the classroom. In fact, the classroom didn't really matter, because this was about breaking down traditional boundaries and extending the learning and teaching process beyond anything we had been able to do previously."

Mr Neale, however, was adamant he did not want to use gimmicks. "We don't do gimmicks," he explains, "we use technology that will provide a real benefit for the school and its pupils, rather than technology for technology's sake". So when Simon Elledge, along with Chris Nash from technology provider, Steljes, proposed a research study to compare a class of Year 3 seven-year olds using the SmartPhones to a class using Apple Macbooks, Beatrix Potter Primary School was interested.

War heroes

Now at the end of the first term, the trial is going well and inspiring the teachers and classroom teaching assistants as much as the children.

"As well as supporting personalised learning, the handheld devices are also encouraging the children to collaborate, both outside when they're collecting data and inside when they are back in classroom,"

Chris Nash,
Mobile Learning Consultant, Steljes.

The last two months have been spent putting the devices through their paces as part of Year 3's World War I (WWI) project, which has seen the children taking video and photographs and recording sound as they research WWI soldiers' graves at the Wandsworth Cemetery on Magdalen Road opposite the school.

The Cemetery, opened in 1878, is fascinating for the children and holds many clues as to how and when soldiers died during the Great War. Particularly interesting are those who fought from far-off countries like Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada and died at the nearby London General Hospital in Wandsworth. Mr Neale explains how the fascination for WWI graves began: "Each year pupils go over to the graveyard and place poppies on the soldiers' graves for Remembrance Day. This year though, the children wanted to find out more about who they were and how they died, so we started off by writing to the Newfoundland Regiment, Canadian Embassy and so on and it snowballed from there. When we introduced the SmartPhones this term, it seemed a great opportunity to integrate them into the project and really bring it alive."

Each soldier's grave is marked with the name, age and the date they died – most in 1916 during the Battle of the Somme – and their service numbers. This enables the children to record the details quickly and easily on their SmartPhone and then take them back to the classroom to share with their classmates on the interactive whiteboard, using collaborative software SychonEyes™.

"As well as supporting personalised learning, the handheld devices are also encouraging the children to collaborate, both outside when they're collecting data and inside when they are back in classroom," explains Chris Nash, Mobile

Learning Consultant at Steljes. "It's fascinating to see the children showing pictures and video to their friends and comparing what they've just done when they are out, taking a keen interest and sharing them back in the classroom – this is what Anytime Learning is all about."

The seven-year olds are clearly very comfortable with the technology, as devices like mobile phones and computers are familiar to them in their everyday life – to the extent that they sometimes end up reminding their teachers how to get the best from the device!

According to Roehampton's Simon Elledge: "Over 90% of households now have a mobile device, so this is technology children have grown up with. While clearly excited and inspired using the SmartPhones, the children know their way around the device, confidently flicking between the keypad, touchscreen and stylus to write, take pictures, video and record audio clips. If they need to look something up on the Internet, they can access it via the mobile internet. They can't, however, make phone calls or send text messages."

As the trial continues, Beatrix Potter's Mr Neale is happy with the progress and enthusiasm from pupils and teachers alike. While the handheld devices are only being used by Year 3 currently, the Headteacher is confident and enthusiastic about rolling it out to others at a later stage. "We are showing our pupils how to become independent learners through the use of mobile technology, and so far in just a short period of time we are seeing differences in the way the children learn both as individuals and as a group. It's very encouraging to see the way they have embraced the technology and their enthusiasm to learn both inside and outside the classroom."

