

Stow Heath Junior School

A pocket-sized catalyst for Active Learning

How the use of PDAs has helped teachers extend the learning potential of field trips and educational visits and sharpened the quality of student interaction and participation in the classroom.

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*Teacher,
Stow Heath Junior School.*



The Challenge

The potential of the PDA in the field and the classroom – In spring 2006 sixty pupils from Stow Heath Junior School Wolverhampton were planning a field trip to Tenby in South Wales.

The class already had PDAs as part of the groundbreaking Local Authority Learning2Go trial and were confident users of the devices. Following a research proposal from Steljes the teachers decided to trial the use of the devices as a replacement for the clipboard and pen to see what difference it made to the range and the depth of their study and understanding when PDAs were taken on location.

The Solution

Advance notice of the learning to come was given to the students via their own PDAs in the classroom. Using Memory Map software which combines a standard map view with an optional 3D modelled landscape the teacher was able to show students the journey they would be taking on the classroom whiteboard.

The teacher described the process as “taking a visual trip where we were able to stop, look and get to know the basic landforms and features.” Wherever the teacher was on the whiteboard map the students had the same location appear on their PDAs as a neat red circle on the PDA map display showing their exact location. When the day arrived enthusiasm levels were high and “the levels of engagement were nearly off the scale” noted an assistant.

One observer commented “Forget the handheld focus for a moment this is foot-felt learning at its most powerful. Students are out in the great outdoors identifying features they have only seen before in books. When the time is right they take their cameras and photograph a scene and to their delight they are shown how they can link the picture to a note on the actual map at the precise location that it was taken at.”

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*Dave Whyley,
Project Co-ordinator.*

Harvesting

Words, sounds and pictures and linking it all to a location

Elsewhere students were overheard remarking "That's a great habitat, let me type in the facts then I'll take a picture." As the day progresses students sit each other down at key locations and record interviews straight to their PDAs "I'm using voice recorder to interview Niomi about this habitat site at the water's edge" when finished the soundfile is linked to the map where it appears as a small speaker icon for others to click and learn from later back in school. The day was a resounding success and showed the power of location work with the PDA. The use of the PDA linked by Bluetooth to separate GPS receivers was described as "technically challenging" by the IT support staff but this part of the activity will get progressively easier as new PDA devices and phones are likely to have GPS capability built in.

Dewi Lloyd the Steljes mobile learning specialist assisting in the project noted that "The PDA device was used as a harvester as a true sketching and note taking tool". Two weeks worth of follow up activities continued back at school as students used their PDA pictures, sounds and notes to create group presentations on what they had learned using Pocket Slides which gives almost full Microsoft® PowerPoint® authoring capability on a handheld computer. "With this type of work we are starting to see a quality difference in output and a much deeper consideration of the learning opportunities " notes Dave Whyley the Project Co-ordinator. Schools are learning the difference that is made when all students have access to a quality camera and sound recorder that the PDAs contain.

The wisdom

Champion pragmatism over technical dependence...

When Richard Anderson eLearning Coordinator at Wolverhampton City Learning Centre, came to plan a visit to Wightwick Manor he realised the limitations of GPS which doesn't work inside buildings. Instead he made a rich interactive experience by placing 4 number codes at key places in the building. Students then typed in the codes to bring up information on the room or the object that they were close to. Many CLCs are developing similar geographical learning trails using Mediator software to build the interactive journeys on the PC which are then saved as small sized Flash files to be used on the PDAs in the field. The PDA provides a powerful way of taking these tools into the learner's personal domain. By making full use of the PDA functionality ICT has been used to strengthen field work rather than replacing or virtualising it! This work is also important as it anticipates the learning opportunities that will now come when, thanks to built in GPS, all portable devices "know where they are" in 3D space.

