Linkage College: Inclusive interaction with iPads

Summary

Linkage College identified issues of cost and mobility in using big communication devices with some of their learners with specific needs. Initial trials identified an iPad as a more affordable and accessible alternative. Their use can improve interaction in the classroom and help individuals develop lifelong management skills relating to their communication needs.

About Linkage College

Linkage College provides residential specialist further education and day courses for learners usually aged between 16-25. The College was awarded an Ofsted Grade 1 ‘Outstanding’ status in 2008 and is able to meet the various needs of a wide range of individuals with learning disabilities and associated physical disabilities. The College comprises of two campuses in Lincolnshire; Weelsby Campus in Grimsby and the Toynton Campus in the rural setting of Toynton All Saints near to the market town of Spilsby in the Lincolnshire Wolds. Learners come from all areas of the UK and Overseas.

The challenge

A key motivation for Linkage College to use more ‘mainstream’ technology with learners, specifically encouraging the use of iPads, relates to the generally high cost of technology designed to support individuals’ communication needs. It can often cost around £5,000, plus the cost of a technician, and therefore there is limited availability of such devices. These devices are also often difficult to use, incurring an additional ‘training’ cost. Therefore, a simpler, more accessible and more cost effective solution was desired.
The activity

Katherine Alonso, Speech and Language Therapist, trialled free games on her iPad that were fun and interactive for students to engage with. She worked with those assessed by the College as having speech and language difficulties, familiarising them with the device, its ‘apps’, and using the inbuilt iPad tools to support their learning. This included the learners using the camera to express themselves and using apps to improve communication with teachers and peers.

The project was developed further as a result of the positive reaction to the device and the relative ease with which the students learned how to use it. Due to college budget restrictions and the importance of encouraging lifelong use of the technology (beyond the time the individual is at the college), Katherine and the College encouraged students to buy their own devices.

The College downloaded appropriate apps onto the devices. These included the Makaton App, ‘MyChoicePad‘, to help learners develop additional communication skills. The app teaches sign language by displaying words with a corresponding symbol and a video of how to sign it. The College also downloaded the ‘Taptotalk’ App, a communication device simulator that learners with severe speech difficulties can use to ask questions and have conversations with others by touching pictures of items they want to say. It enables them to develop confidence and independence through being able to ‘talk’ via the iPad (see video).

Learners were also taught how to use the camera and other key functions of the iPad to help them interact with it as independently as possible.

Katherine emphasised the importance that individuals “take ownership of the device and therefore understand that it is their responsibility to look after it, for example making sure that they charge it and have it ready to use in lessons.”
The outcomes

Key outcomes were:

- Students and staff in the College are beginning to have a greater understanding of how mobile devices can be used to support individuals’ communication needs in a variety of ways
- Staff and students have greater access to technology to support learning
- There has been improved interactivity for some students in some lessons

The impact

So far Katherine has identified that the impact has included:

- Individuals who have used their weekly budget to buy their own device have gained additional saving and budgeting knowledge and skills
- Students have gained skills to support their communication while at the college as well as after they have left
- Increased (wider) communication between individuals after realizing that they share an interest in the technology and/or apps

While it is difficult to get direct quotes from students with communication needs, Katherine has witnessed a profound act from one student who “hugged his iPad and said he loved it” after using it.

The lessons learned

Lessons learned include:

- Make sure staff have basic understanding of the technology to be used - don’t assume that everyone has knowledge
- Make sure individuals take out insurance to cover the device. Mobile devices are relatively easy to steal – especially from vulnerable individuals - and have a value to everyone, unlike big communication devices
- Teach students how to use the technology responsibly
- The importance of investing in a protective bag for devices, to help longevity of technology as well as individual security

Encouraging individuals (or their parents) to buy the devices for themselves is sustainable for both the College and the student. The college does not have to budget for a large outlay of technology; whilst the learner will not have devices taken off them at key developmental stages and can continue using the technology to support them after they have left the College.

Katherine has already identified that a similar use of iPads could be transferred to other areas – especially for individuals with ‘social
communication’ issues (autism, etc.), visual impairments (convert elements to audio) and hearing impairments (convert elements to text).

**Useful links**

- Linkage College
- iPad Apps
- Communication Device App ‘TaptoTalk’
- Makaton App ‘MyChoicePad’

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