

INSANELY GREAT!

Great Oaks School

Helping students with complex learning difficulties communicate using iPad

After working with Creative Partnerships and the Department of Electronic Computer Science at Southampton University on a range of new technology trials, Great Oaks School joined Jigsaw24's e7 Project to see if iPad mini would be able to help students with a range of learning and communication difficulties access the curriculum. The results? Increased engagement and communication, plus one or two surprises...

Great Oaks School initially starting using iPad as a communication device for SLD (Severe Learning Difficulties) students. Working with Erica Smith from Creative Partnerships and E.A Draffan from the University of Southampton, they attempted to find a digital alternative to their existing PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) and to set up their own social networking system, which eventually became the Go!Platform.

"To make a new symbol for the PECS really is an onerous task," explained Creative co-ordinator Roger Hardy, "because you have to go to the internet, you need to purchase a license to be able to use the symbols, get the symbol up, print it out, chop that out and velcro it both sides to create a set of new resources. That's a lot of work for our support staff, so we were originally looking to see if there were ready-made apps on iPad that we could use to replace that."

Despite some initial frustrations with the apps on offer - many used a different PECS symbol set to Great Oaks', were "too American", "gimmicky" or "made the massive assumption that SLD students would be able to navigate away from a page and come back" - Great Oaks' team were impressed with the potential of iPad, and the volume of resources available through the App Store. They began looking into other potential uses for the device.

Joining the e7 Project

"I was looking on the Internet for organisations that were doing development work with schools and iPad, and Jigsaw24 came up," said Roger. "Originally, we were told that because of the size of the school we didn't really qualify. Then I got a call back saying that they were thinking about working with special schools and schools of different sizes and they were happy with what I'd put in writing already and thought it might be worth developing."

After consulting with their e7 representative, Andy Cain, the Great Oaks team decided to opt for iPad mini during their trial, as these devices were not only easier for children to hold, but included a built-in camera that could be used as part of the school's many cross-curricular creative projects, and would allow staff to take pictures of real items around school to use as PECS symbols.



Working with...



In a nutshell...

Who are Great Oaks School?

Great Oaks are a 150 strong secondary Special Needs school in Southampton. They help children from across Hampshire access the curriculum despite facing a wide range of complex learning and communication difficulties.

How did Jigsaw24 help?

We provided 40 iPad mini tablets for students and staff for the spring term, as well as ongoing technical support and a wealth of resources to help staff get started.

What were the benefits?

Students were able to use the devices to communicate more effectively and engage in a wider variety of collaborative and creative tasks. Pupils on the scheme made notable improvements in behaviour and communication, and staff are now far more comfortable using iPad and similar technology as part of their lessons.

“ You don't want to say 'be on your iPad all day long, but if it becomes an integrated tool that you can use when you need to, then I think it frees you up from some of those processes that were stopping you from doing things. Instead of saying, 'no we can't do that, it's too hard', it becomes 'yes, actually we can do that..' ”

Roger Hardy, Creative Co-ordinator, Great Oaks School

Getting staff trained on iPad (and winning over parents)

A few of the teachers at Great Oaks already used iPad as their main device, so were receptive to twilight training sessions run by Erica Smith and creative trainer Ricky Tart. Other staff members were then encouraged to pass on what they'd learned to other users. But "the best way that we've found to get people's skills up is to do projects," Roger explained. "Working with creative people like Ricky Tart on film-making, animation and poetry projects has really helped to cement the learning that has taken place.

"A lot of our training has happened by one of us seeing what everyone else is doing and saying, 'ooh, I'd like to do that,' so we've trained each other up. It's becoming more integrated in the school that we just use iPad. We're making short films as part of our Arts Week, and we're going to do that almost completely on the iPad. These films will be entered into several national competitions and really develop the skills of both pupils and staff. We might even use the minute-long preview template in iMovie for making the films. But obviously that is a great way to do training, and it lends itself not only to all the technical elements of making a documentary, but also uploading and editing it."

Using iPad for project work has also helped the school win over parents who were unsure about the scheme. Using a combination of their e7 iPad mini deployment and the school's social media site, Go!Platform, students were able to create and upload content for their parents to view before the day was over, so they could catch up with what their children were doing during the day.

"When we had the e7 iPad deployment we were encouraging the kids to film all the time," said Roger. "I've got a three part film of a boy in my class making a clay rhino, and he's not got great speech and language but you could see him developing as he went along, because he'd seen YouTube videos and he understood the format. It's the unexpected stuff that's been really amazing."

Introducing students to iPad and launching the e7 Project

"When we did the first pilot project, using iPad as a communication tool, I was terrified," admitted Roger. "One of the very first students looked at it – she's not a verbal communicator and we thought she'd really like it, but she picked it up and just flung it across the room. But it survived and it's fine. We're still using that iPad!"

With the iPad crash-tested, Roger and the rest of the staff set about using sensory apps to acclimatise students with very high support needs to the new devices, and "by time we started the e7 Project with the iPad mini it was completely different. The kids could literally not wait because they've already seen iPad devices around the school. Andy from Jigsaw24 came down and we had all the tablets stacked up in a pile with a spotlight on them in the hall, and all the parents came in and [the pupils] couldn't believe that they were actually taking these things away with them."

“There were a few staff that couldn't believe we were just handing over these iPad mini devices. They thought students wouldn't be working, wouldn't be concentrating in lessons, and in fact the opposite happened: they just worked more and were more motivated.”

Roger Hardy, **Creative Co-ordinator, Great Oaks School**

It wasn't all plain sailing, but Roger and the team found that the sense of ownership generated by a 1:1 scheme like the e7 Project meant that pupils took far better care of their devices than expected. "Of the 40 we had, none were broken. An iPad trolley that moves around and you log in and log out, that's not really anything to do with you [as a pupil]. But having an iPad that's yours and that you take home and do all your work on, compose your own music on, that was a huge development. We had one case where [one of our pupils with behavioural difficulties] was losing her temper, she knew she was about to trash the room and she asked someone to hold her iPad mini for her.

"There were a few staff that couldn't believe we were just handing over these iPad mini devices. They thought students wouldn't be working, and in fact the opposite happened: they just worked more and were more motivated."

Improving speech and communication with iPad and game-based learning

While Great Oaks are still searching for their ideal PECS app (current favourite Widgit Go is still being developed for iOS) they've had some major success with MLD students, which Roger puts down the more interactive, role-based nature of learning through apps and games. "There's one particular child in my class who's really weak on

speech and language," he explained. "He loved [playing Minecraft on the iPad], joined in with everyone else, and as a matter of course if you see a group of children playing Minecraft together, they don't stop talking and listening. Our speech therapist could not believe how much his speech and language had improved over that one term. And I had to say, to be honest this is solely down to Minecraft, because he wants to be a peer. We are developing a Minecraft after school club in the autumn of 2013.

"If you have a lot of learning difficulties and you're used to not being able to keep up with everyone, and then suddenly when you immerse yourself in a game, you can become somebody who looks like everybody else, behaves like everybody else in the game. That alter ego is a brand new person. And I think that enabled him or encouraged him to work in that role, because there he was on an equal footing with the others and he had the cognitive capacity to do all the tasks in the game, so the only thing that was holding him back was his own lack of confidence. And now he doesn't stop talking - he's alive with it! He talks all the time about getting the iPad mini back."

The future of Great Oaks' iPad deployment

After three years of testing out various devices, Great Oaks have now purchased enough iPad devices for all Key Stage 4 pupils. All teaching staff have now been issued with an iPad mini as well. They're also looking to revamp their Wi-Fi network in order to better support the 70 devices they do have, and are hoping that they'll be able to access a broader range of apps and features when they leave their local authority and take control of their own IT setup later in the year. And would they recommend the e7 scheme? "I have! I've been recommending it to people I know at other schools and have been saying please get in touch with Jigsaw24, because I think maybe they might not be aware the e7 Project exists or think that they won't qualify, but everyone should ask!"

“Jigsaw24 have been absolutely fantastic. We've had really good support, and the online videos on their site are really helpful. I've got nothing but good to say, they've been really great.”

Roger Hardy, **Creative Co-ordinator, Great Oaks School**

For more information about the e7 Project and how iPad can help in your classroom, get in touch with us on the details below.