

Children show their true colours

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Whiteboards have weaved their digital magic at a special needs college, whose pupils are being carefully integrated into mainstream education. Heather McLean reports

Interactive whiteboards have revolutionised learning at West Oaks school and technology college. Students at the special needs and emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) school, on various campuses around Leeds, are benefiting from its use of mainstream learning technology.

Software programs combined with whiteboards and digital photography are giving students unprecedented access to the national curriculum. And these adapted resources can be transferred back into mainstream education to help schools help students with similar issues, says Elaine Hampson, the assistant head and ICT curriculum manager at West Oaks.

When a whiteboard was installed in teacher Sue Towers' classroom last January, many of her students discovered a new way to express themselves. One such student was seven-year-old Nathan Ullah. Using the whiteboard, he made rapid progress.

Towers says: "Nathan has learning needs associated with autistic spectrum condition. He was fairly solitary and not really interacting with his environment. When we put the interactive whiteboard in, Nathan's behaviour changed. He went from standing in front of the board dancing, to touching the board and anticipating what comes next. We can now change the objective of an exercise and he follows the course of cause and effect; he's learning. He knows it's got a process."

Hampson takes mainstream teaching software and adapts it to suit the abilities of each student. Teachers rely heavily on interactive whiteboards, which maintain lesson focus. Using software programs such as Widgit Software's Writing with Symbols (£400 for 10 user licences), Immersive Education's Kar2ouche programs (from £219 plus user licences,) and software from Inclusive Technology, Hampson develops projects that focus on whiteboards. The main West Oaks site caters for students between the ages of two-and-a-half and 19 years. This campus has 13 Smartboard interactive whiteboards (£3,500 each).

The school also has a mobile Smartboard (£5,700), which is height adjustable - good for young children and students in wheelchairs - and backlit. The school also runs one class within a nearby primary. Twelve West Oaks children between eight and 11 years work at key stage 2 here, and when appropriate, join in with mainstream classes.

A few miles away is the Oakwood Lane site for EBD students, which became part of West Oaks two years ago. This campus was a failing school until it came under West Oaks' wing. Now all three classes have interactive whiteboards and every student and teacher has a wireless networked laptop computer.

The end goal is to get the students back into mainstream school by slowly integrating them, starting with one morning a week at a mainstream school. Stonegate, a secondary school for EBD students, is under special measures.

It was taken over by head of West Oaks, Hillary McEwan, in January. Hampson outlines the school's passion for ICT: "The most important thing is that ICT enables access to the curriculum for each child. Not many of our children can write as they have severe learning difficulties. Many of our children also have very severe language difficulties; some don't have language at all.

But everyone here does the national curriculum, adapted through ICT for their abilities." Digital photography and film is crucial for West Oaks. Each class has its own digital camera, which is used to record student progress. The pictures are filed in pupils' records of achievement, displayed around the school and given to parents.

Every teacher is able to quickly download pictures and immediately display them on the whiteboard or print them out.

"Our students can't write, but they can take digital pictures and use the whiteboards to put sounds and pictures together. They can access mainstream ICT learning for key stage 3 at their level, key stage 1, with these resources," Hampson says.

Digital photography is often used in conjunction with the whiteboards. Teachers requested that Hampson create an electronic registration programme. Now, digital pictures of all students in a class are displayed on the interactive whiteboard each morning. The school has also invested in three digital camcorders and a digital video-editing suite. These tools have been invaluable in capturing pupils' achievements, Hampson says.

"A still image shows a snapshot in time, but 20 seconds of a moving image will show a student actually doing something, which allows you to really assess learning because you have visual evidence."

As a technology college, the school received government money for ICT equipment over a four-year period. However, the vast sums the school has spent have mostly been generated by selling the training, technical and consultative skills of McEwan, Hampson and school systems manager, Ewan Stewart, to other schools.

"We know how much of an impact ICT has had on our kids, so it's value for money. For that, you find the money from somewhere," Hampson says.

