

Interactive 'pods' get the teachers' vote

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Shy pupils can be just as vocal as their most assertive peers thanks to handheld keypads that make tough lessons seem like a game. Heather McLean reports

Screwed up in concentration, the children's faces are glued to the whiteboard. When the teacher asks the class of five- and six-year-olds to vote on whether "cheese" is spelt (a) chese; (b) cheas; (c) cheese; or (d) don't know, a quiet murmur ripples through the room. "Pods" are excitedly held aloft and aimed at the screen to vote, before being rolled around on the carpet like oddly shaped marbles.

Martha Dobbing, ICT coordinator at Lauriston primary school in Hackney, London, has been using the pods - Promethean's ACTIVstudioMV handheld keypads - with year 1 because it draws them into the lesson. Dobbing says it helps her to control and teach more difficult students, allows her to see quickly what each child understands and shows how her own teaching skills are working.

On each screen used in Dobbing's literacy lesson are four choices of how to spell a word, and a picture of the word itself. The students vote on which answer is the correct spelling. When they press the appropriate letter on their handheld device, the student's name lights up across the top of the screen to show they have voted, but the chart showing their selection is anonymous. However, Dobbing is able to see what pupils voted for, and how long it took them to vote.

When introducing the technology to her class the week after the UK elections, Dobbing used the news coverage to explain the importance of voting and how it works in terms of privacy. She did this to prevent her students from shouting out the answers to questions and cheering or booing their peers, which added pressure and reduced the secrecy.

Helen Johnson is ICT coordinator at Muxton primary school in Telford, Shropshire. She has been trialling Hitachi Interactive Solutions' Verdict voting software for two months with years 5 and 6, and hopes to buy the school its own kit next year using e-learning credits.

Johnson introduced the technology to her classes as a game. She created her own version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and integrated that with the election news that week. Pupils discussed how voting systems involved pushing buttons to create interactive television, phone voting and text message polls.

"It's the interactivity - the wow factor - that gets children hooked. They don't know they're learning," says Johnson. "This technology promotes speaking and listening skills, plus provides them with individualised learning. It links into excellence and enjoyment in the curriculum. They love their Xboxes - why shouldn't they love this?"

She says the software can be used individually or in groups, so questions can be tailored for specific groups split by academic ability. For lower ability students, the voting process enables them to participate fully in the class because of its anonymity. Johnson says her students have said to her they no longer fear getting a question wrong.

Dobbing says voting software is particularly useful at pulling less able and less interested pupils into lessons. The voting handsets, nicknamed pods or "eggs" by the students, allow her to have more control over those with behavioural problems. "For some children, just having something in their hands focuses their attention. And as they hate not being able to use the pods, I can tell them that, if they don't behave, they can't join in."

Maggie Newton, headteacher at Marden primary school, near Hereford, finds ACTIVstudioMV has an impact on pupils with challenging behaviour. "When they come in every morning, they settle very quickly because they have a pin number to log onto the system with, and have created a kind of competition to log on first," she says.

"I might ask them a question straight away, such as who feels good today, vote (a) yes or (b) no. If anyone says 'no', I can ask them what the problem is. I can also do things like ask them to be quiet and to press (d) if they are ready to start the lesson. It really helps me clearly identify pupils where I need to put extra input in, and also where pupils have exceeded expectations."

Newton says identifying weaknesses is a key quality of the software. "It helps me easily identify what I might need to go over again, and where I may have to change my approach over the direction of the lesson or go over a certain concept or idea again. It makes me focus on my questioning in the lessons, and how students might respond."

Keri Facer, director of learning research at Nesta Futurelab, says voting and assessment software turns the tables on the teachers. "Students are continuously able to show how effective they are. They can show their teachers that a certain way of teaching isn't working."

Another resource is through the London Grid for Learning, which offers all London schools an online polling resource. Burdett Coutts primary school in Westminster has used it to create an online council for years 5 and 6. Nominated students from each class used the internet and digital media to create campaign videos, which were shown in a presentation. All students then voted for their favourite candidate. The results were instantly available, impressing both students and teachers.

Links

Promethean ACTIVstudioMV:

www.prometheanworld.com/uk/html/solutions/primary/activstudiomv.shtml

Hitachi voting software: www.hitachi-education.com