

The writing's on the wall for paper and pencil

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Primary teachers can now choose from a variety of interactive technology to spice up the way they teach their pupils to write

Fat marker pens squeak against individual whiteboards held tightly in the laps of a year 1 writing skills class, clustered together on the carpet. Small, furrowed brows are focused on the interactive whiteboard in front of them, pondering which adjectives can best describe the picture and sounds of a forest shown on the screen.

Bethan Williams, ICT coordinator and deputy head at Thames Ditton primary school, Surrey, has taken images from the online search engine, Google images, combined them with royalty-free online Wav sound files of birds and an eerie wind, and put it together using software on her interactive whiteboard to create story settings.

Here, Wilf the dog asks the students to create an amazing story. Williams asks the class what they have written and amid the calls of "singing birds", one child says she heard a grizzly bear, proving the effectiveness of these resources as a stimulus for the young writer's imagination.

"Using software and web content like this helps children organise and mindmap," says Williams. "It's an effective way for them to list and order ideas, so it's quicker to show the impact of their words. And as a teacher, everything's there, so you can condense your teaching."

A host of innovative areas are being covered by teachers looking at the world of non-fiction. John Spencer, year 4 class teacher and literacy coordinator at Kingsfold primary school in Penwortham, Lancashire, used web content to teach a work unit for year 4 literacy on learning to write non-chronological reports. As his students love natural history, Spencer used tigers as the theme. Online, he found a brilliantly resourced website for pictures and video clips of tigers taken by photographer Chris Brunskill, who filmed tigers in India. Spencer used his laptop and a projector to show his class a 40-second clip of tigers doing something specific, each day for a week.

While he played a clip of tigers catching their prey to the class, he asked them to think of as many verbs to describe the scene as possible. "The pupils came up with really savage, powerful words. From there, we built sentences with each child working independently, then they worked on writing a whole paragraph. In this way we did a paragraph a day and at the end of the week, they each had a report."

Blogging has been brought into the classroom at St Ives school in Haslemere, Surrey. Each student in year 6 has their own blog in a secure, walled setting using Elgg software. Deputy head and information systems manager Miles

Berry explains: "We wanted students to learn how to express their views, and it's been a success. We also wanted them to develop an acceptance of other's contributions, to appreciate others' perspectives. They are learning and being inspired by each other's writing in a far more immediate way than if we just stuck their work on the wall."

Also at St Ives, students in years 5 and 6 are using wikis (web content that anyone has freedom to edit, such as the free encyclopaedia at www.wikipedia.org) to develop collaborative writing skills. Within the school's virtual learning environment (based on free, open-source Moodle software) wikis have been incorporated to allow classes to work together on homework assignments.

One example is where a class is asked to find the meanings of a list of words. The list was posted on a Moodle wiki page and each student took two or three words to research. They wrote their definitions on the wiki page from home and then edited each others' entries, adding information and changing spelling and grammar.

At St Andrews Church of England primary school in Dronfield, Derbyshire, year 2 teacher Helen Welsby trawls Google images for pictorial content to turn into inspiring resources for her class. She combines words, pictures and sounds using the Activprimary software that came with her Promethean interactive whiteboard and Textease, a child-friendly desktop publishing software program, to give her students an interactive experience of what she wants them to write about.

Welsby recently took a picture of the Amazon rainforest from Google images, turned it into an on-screen postcard using Textease, and included digital pictures of her students' heads. She then added WAV sound files taken from royalty-free online sites, ranging from different types of rain to howler monkeys and toucans. The class worked together to find words to describe the rainforest, then each student used that exercise to write a postcard to Welsby.

Catherine Eyre, year 1 class teacher at St Andrews, uses programs from the website, ICT Games, to teach students from reception to the beginning of year 1 the correct letter formation with the Sky Writer software programme. A cartoon plane flies around the interactive whiteboard screen showing the students with its cloud-trail how to form letters of the alphabet. The children copy the letters drawn by the plane using their finger in the air, on another child's back or on their personal whiteboards using marker pens to reinforce the movement of the letters.

Sarah Neild, ICT coordinator at Birchley St Mary's Catholic primary school in Billinge, Lancashire, uses a plethora of online resources.

For year 3 students studying myths and fables, she visits the Aesop Fables website from the University of Massachusetts in the US. This provides simple

animations of traditional fables and modern versions of the same stories, allowing students to write to style and consider moral implications of stories.

Neild shows her pupils the Aesop's fable-based animation, The Tortoise and the Hare, which is part of the year 3 curriculum. Using Microsoft Word documents providing drop-down word choices for the pupils, Neild's students create modern versions of the story. The class then use PowerPoint to make talking books using pictures they have drawn on Microsoft Paint or taken from Clip Art. They put their story text underneath the pictures and add their own recorded words. "PowerPoint enables them to change things in their writing so they can explore and manipulate their work," says Neild. "They can take a risk doing something and if they decide they don't like that idea they can throw it out."

Weblinks

Online encyclopaedia: www.wikipedia.org

Elgg blogging software: www.elgg.org

Tiger photos: www.chrisbrunskill.co.uk

Aesop's Fables: www.umass.edu/aesop

Activprimary software: www.prometheanworld.com/uk/primary

ICT Games: www.ICTgames.com