

SMART LEARNING

BEST SCHOOLS

An Apple for the teachers

By Marie Boran

Although nothing has revolutionised the classroom so rapidly and so dramatically as much as modern technology, it can be said that nothing has done this so well while bridging the gap between teachers and their digital natives as mobile touchscreen technology.

Rathdown School for Girls in Glenageary, Co Dublin, can vouch for this, as it was the first school in Ireland to have its pupils use iPads. Financed by the recent NCTE hardware funds, the school decided to introduce the popular Apple device to all its first-year students. It is now being used across three subjects – maths, science and Spanish – and for a minimum of one to two hours per day.

This is a pilot scheme, but there are plans to consider expanding deployment beyond the first-year pupils.

"To this end we are working very closely with Apple, our IT Supplier Typetec and digital textbook suppliers to ensure this pilot is a success," said principal Anne Dowling.

"Right now the main objective is to get used to the iPad, and all teachers are invited to experiment with it. If this enhances learning and improves performance, then the intention is to roll it out further."

While this is reaching a generation of children that have been using a mouse since they were two or three years old, Horst Punzet, Rathdown's IT manager, pointed out that teachers must also be trained to use the technology.

"The iPad is more intuitive to use," Punzet said. "All the kinds of things, such as instal-

ling an application or browsing the web, are much more straightforward to do."

Teachers are encouraged to play around with the iPad, and given the freedom to discover, install and test out apps that may be of benefit in the classroom. These apps are evaluated and synched to the iPads if they work out. Part of the pilot includes a base of iPads available to all pupils in the library for project work.

"This has changed our whole thinking of the library," Dowling said. "Each day, the iPads are docked there to charge. We are beginning to see that the girls will come in and reach instinctively for the iPad, instead of a stack of encyclopedias."

"When you think of all the reference material, maths, calculator and other kinds of apps on board, you can see that you are holding a multitude of resources in your hands. This is where we're really beginning to reap rewards in terms of enhancing the learning experience."

But what about the parents? Dowling said they were equally enthused about the iPad as a learning tool. At the parent evening, which included a presentation, everyone seemed excited and there weren't any reservations about a negative impact on performance and exams because it was seen as something to complement rather than replace traditional teaching.

The pen and paper were not going away, said Dowling, nor was the laptop or projector. The iPad is a pedagogical accompaniment rather than an across-the-board replacement.

The biggest worry when it comes to integrating the device – or indeed any new technology – into the learning process is how it will fit into the curriculum. Dowling said the diffi-

culty was in having an adequate number of curriculum-approved apps. The iPad, it seems, is only limited by the apps or lack thereof.

"Ideally we would like to have more textbooks and interactive learning tools available," she said. However, one of the limitations is that iPad doesn't display Flash, a video technology that is used in many sites including educational websites that teacher may already be using in class.

She said that simply having PDF versions of textbooks was not interactive enough but hoped that, through talking to publishers in Ireland, there would be plenty of iPad-friendly curriculum-approved material in the near future.

In the meantime, there are plenty of ways to use it in the classroom, both for working on Junior and Leaving Certificate subjects and to encourage creativity.

"My transition-year students have been playing with a synthesizer app, for example, and within minutes, one of the girls had laid down a track with her voice and played a song to accompany it," Punzet said. "It's amazing how quickly the kids take to it. It's intuitive."

Dowling said it was important to have that freedom to deviate from the curriculum, because it came back to the idea of self-directed learning and it was important to see students are going off by themselves to discover and learn new things.

Meanwhile, there was the expectation of a steep learning curve for the IT department when schools decided to take on something new. Many Irish schools will be PC-only or perhaps not be overly familiar with touchscreen technology, but Punzet said that, from the IT perspective, it wasn't overly complicated.



First-year pupils at Rathdown School for Girls in Glenageary have access to iPads for one or two hours a day across three subjects, maths, science and Spanish

"It was relatively straightforward to set up," he said. "A preliminary set of apps was selected and loaded onto all iPads. These were generally education-orientated, but some were game-based like Sudoku and Scrabble. One central iMac in the library controls all apps that are installed on the iPads."

From a security standpoint, all internet access is filtered using the Department of Education NCTE filtering system. Students cannot add their own apps or bring the iPad home with them, though these rules may change over time.

One question that will be on the lips of many educators that see the iPad as an expensive gadget is, why the iPad? Why not netbooks, which are cheaper?

Dowling and Punzet agreed

that the iPad was the best choice for the school for various reasons. Dowling cited the lightweight compact design, superior battery life and the fact that it powered up almost instantly without a long boot-up period. Punzet said he had tried a cheaper touchscreen alternative, but that it didn't compare, coming up short in screen size and battery life.

He defended the pricing of the iPad by pointing out that the purchase of an e-book reader and netbook would cost

the same and that this was not even factoring in the most important aspect of the iPad as an educational tool: the growing number of apps available.

Dowling said now was the right time to try emerging mobile touchscreen technology in the classroom.

"I think that because it is in its infancy, a lot of people are waiting to see what else comes along but we're not taking the 'wait and see' approach," she said. "We want to let students embrace autonomous learning now."

IT teacher advocates Apple and its apps

While considering how to deploy the iPad, Rathdown School got in touch with Frasier Spiers, an evangelist for technology in the classroom and an IT teacher who has given an iPad to every student at the Cedars School of Excellence in Scotland where he teaches.

Spiers started a series of blog posts entitled The iPad Project, in which he documented the process of purchasing, installing and educating with the mobile device. For Spiers it is all about the apps.

"We found a number of teachers were starting to collaborate with students and try new things, like with our iPad band," Spiers said. "It's the software – the apps – that is really changing the game. One minute the iPad is a book, the next it's a map or a painting tablet."

Here are some of the apps that are used in both schools:

Star Walk: 5 Stars Astronomy Guide

This application teaches astronomy by allowing the student to explore the virtual night sky and discover the stars, constellations, and satellites simply by pointing the iPad skyward and using GPS to see the names of heavenly bodies above you.

Scrabble

Scrabble doesn't just

improve verbal dexterity; it's a fun game that allows the use of an iPod touch or iPhone via Bluetooth as a separate tile rack. A great way to challenge a growing vocabulary.

iBooks

This app comes pre-installed on the iPad and acts as an ebook reader. It can also load and display PDF files so should a school have their textbooks in PDF format, they can be studied on the iPad.

Keynote

Keynote is Apple's version of Microsoft PowerPoint and the iPad version allows you to create presentations with the touch of a finger, something that can be used to present class science projects and the like by combining images, text and even animated charts.

Percussive

With music apps like Percussive, Drums! And Holiday Bells, you can have band practice without having to invest in all of the instruments.

Cloud Calendar

This one allows educators to use the iPad to plan their day in terms of lesson plans, track homework and all of this can be synced to Google Calendar in the cloud so it can integrate with Google Apps, which is free for schools.

Commercial profile: DataBiz Solutions

Managing a school's resources can be child's play

Schools, which are complex societies in themselves, are notoriously difficult to manage. However, Galway-based DataBiz Solutions has a suite of software products which can streamline the management of a school's personnel and resources, while maximising the learning potential of the entire institution.

Founded in 2004 by teacher Sean Mulkerrins, DataBiz Solutions already has 200 customers from across the education sector in Ireland, including primary, secondary, adult education and even teacher education centres. It has created a number of solutions specifically for the schools market – and crucially, all of DataBiz Solutions' products were created as a result of specific requests from education providers.

"We use three DataBiz Solutions in our school," said John McGarry, principal of St David's BNS in Artane. "All the programs are user-friendly and have been tailored to our needs. Combined with fast and friendly support, I can fully recommend DataBiz Solutions to any school."

Obviously a school's most valuable resource is its pupils and anyone involved in working with children will be aware of the difficulties inherent in managing an entire school. This is why DataBiz Solutions created the DataBiz NS Admin and Attendance program, which is a comprehensive pupil administration system for primary schools, available both in English and Irish.

The unique system stores each pupil's personal details, contact details, sibling and guardian details and medical details and indeed any details required for their management.

In addition to enabling teachers and support staff to re-



Founder of DataBiz Solutions Sean Mulkerrins

cord pupils' attendance, DataBiz NS Admin and Attendance generates mailing labels, class lists, texting and e-mail distribution lists. It also automatically generates the October return, calculates attendance totals and percentages and generates reports on high absentees and the reasons for their absences as required by the NEWB.

It also generates letters for corresponding with parents/guardians regarding high absenteeism, while generating reports identifying pupils with perfect attendance (monthly and yearly). And it stores and analyses pupils' scores in standardised tests. In fact, if it had existed years ago, then more of us would have gone to all our classes.

However, all schools will have a host of other resources, which is why DataBiz Solutions has developed both DataBiz School Library and DataBiz Book Rental to facilitate their management.

DataBiz School Library is a unique technological solution that offers a comprehensive and user-friendly system for managing school libraries. It automatically creates a unique barcode for each resource (books, etc), thus enabling all resources to be checked in and out using a barcode scanner.

In addition to its check-in and out facilities, DataBiz

School Library lists all the resources in the library, as well as reporting which resources are on loan or overdue. It keeps a record of 'borrowing histories', and from a resource management perspective, it lists the most popular and least popular resources, as well as providing statistical analysis of all the library resources.

Like DataBiz Library, DataBiz Book Rental has been specifically designed for book rental schemes, automatically creating a unique barcode for each resource thus enabling all resources to be checked in and out using a barcode scanner.

In addition to recording pupils' contributions and automatically generating a range of reports including lists of resources, a financial breakdown and age analysis of the book rental stock and analysis of both paid contributions and outstanding contributions.

In addition to its programs, DataBiz Solutions also provides web design and online back-up. For further information or to arrange a free demo and/or free trial, contact DataBiz on tel: 091 556755/091-555149 or 087-7761405, e-mail: info@databizsolutions.ie or visit www.databizsolutions.ie

iPod's Touch of class

By Post Reporter

Last September, St Aidan's Primary School in Enniscorthy, Co Wexford, set about exploring new ways to teach and learn, using the iPod Touch. School principal Peter Creedon saw the gadget as a cost-effective way of putting a mobile learning device into the hands of his students.

With the help of Apple supplier Typetec, the school soon had 210 iPads available to use during lessons. "It transforms the student from being a passive to an active learner," said Creedon, "and inspires the student to think creatively, to explore and to share."

He said it is the single biggest change in teaching that the school has encountered, giving kids a valuable tool for working on a curriculum that demands hands-on learning.

The iPads are used as a personal learning device by children in fourth, fifth and sixth class. They have access to an Apple Mac to sync and charge it up, then they're allowed to surf out apps and information within the confines of the school's internet access controls and filtering system.

It's safe and great fun, according to Creedon. "They enjoy the learning. In addition to the educational and social benefits experienced by the student, they have had a positive impact on classroom management."

Creedon said that the device helped children to become adept at being able to summarise and extract information. If a child has a learning difficulty, apps can be sourced that are relevant to their needs and help them learn at their own pace.

If you don't believe the teachers, listen to the kids. On a video made by the school, one young boy perfectly expresses the appeal of his iPod: "It's good to go away from the dusty books and use it instead of wasting all the lead in your pencil."

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