

# Just a TEACHER?

Eileen Field has some inspiring suggestions that could persuade a reluctant SLT to look at technology in a new light...

## Q

I teach English in a community secondary school serving a 'challenging' catchment area. Most of our students arrive with low levels of literacy, and a worrying number leave with exam results that fail to meet government targets. I feel really strongly that an

imaginative use of technology could help us change this – but my head teacher won't even allow mobile phones within school grounds! How can I persuade her to let me try a new approach?

**A** Hmm. It's such a shame that we ask our kids to "turn up, switch off and dumb down", particularly as so many of them carry more tech power in their smartphones than any of us adults probably had in our first computers. Yes, mobiles and gadgets are expensive, prone to damage, are objects of desire and can be distracting – who hasn't lost an hour or so to Candy Crush or Angry Birds? – but it does seem short sighted when the real world revolves around the appropriate use of tech; surely we should be teaching our youngsters how to use it and critically appraise the information it offers and opens up?

Your head is probably right about the lack of educational value a 'simple' mobile has to offer (a calculator, perhaps?) But smartphones are now such a different ball game. The internet at your thumb tips, for a start, and thousands upon thousands of free literacy and numeracy apps just ready for a 10– 15 min practice session; add a touch of supervised reporting of scores and you've got the makings of 'instructional learning' ready to go.

OK, we should always consider the impact of the 'digital divide' and if your lessons require the use of a smart phone or BYOD (bring your own device) you may be on dodgy ground as to the 'equity and equality' of your educational provision. That said – if you can roll in the tech, you could very quickly be creating and using lively and engaging materials to counter your literacy challenges. Why not try tackling your Head with some solid teaching and learning research first, applied with some juicy outcome statistics, iced with neat progress measures for groups with some added tech as sprinkles on top – that's got to be SLT irresistible?

At EdisonLearning, over the last 20 years we've synthesised all the major teaching and learning research

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

GETTING SMART: HOW DIGITAL LEARNING IS CHANGING THE WORLD, TOM VANDER ARK (JOSSEY-BASS)



## ABOUT THE EXPERT

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ideas into something more manageable, which we call the Four Modes of Learning (see diagram, right). The first element of this is Instructional Learning.

This is when we intentionally utilise short, regular dollops of 'errorless learning', where the basics are practised and rehearsed in a hierarchical/stepwise scope and sequence. You aim to deliver this in short, fast paced, regular bursts with lots of different learning trials; say a maximum 20 mins, four times a week. You are looking for accuracy and fluency in basic skills and foundational knowledge – something where your students have to work at it, to get it right.

One low-tech exercise I've seen in action involved students placed in groups of four and given a work sheet each with prompt pictures describing emotions in French. Answer sheets were pinned up outside the classroom. The students had to take it in turns to leave the room, memorise the correct emotion and spelling of the phrase for the picture prompt, then report back to their group. The next team member had to double check the last phrase was correct and then bring home the next. Accuracy and fluency were the assessment foci. It was neat! The teacher circled the room just watching the worksheets fill up ... picking up the misconceptions. There wasn't any chaos.

Now just pause with that thought and add in a few exercises on a computer created on your VLE, or an app on a school smartphone/ tablet, or the student's own smartphone. You could do it in class; as a 1:1 personal learning intervention; or even set it for home learning directly with the parent. The key ingredients are: short, sharp, pacy and regular. Practice, practice, practice. Interleave old content with new; ensure immediate feedback, and reward accuracy and fluency. Have a data dashboard delivering the AfL results back to you for review and reward.

One thing you might like to look at is a programme called Empower3000 ([tinyurl.com/tsempower](http://tinyurl.com/tsempower)). It sends an email three to four times per week with a carefully constructed current news article matched to each student's reading lexile. It has some very clever differentiated assignments which youngsters are encouraged to work through following a prescribed set routine, and continually assesses students' reading levels and provides results immediately so you can address weaknesses and gaps, and further build on strengths. It's a cunning idea ... I'm sure you could adapt it. Good luck!

