

Assistive Technology to Support Classroom Learning

By Dana Toedtman

Many devices, software and electronic tools that have come on the market have been tried, tested and rated as very helpful to support student learning. Before investing in any of these tools, there are some important things to consider. First, make sure you understand your child's learning needs. If the student needs help with the writing process, is it organizing the sentences, or is it composing the sentences that is difficult? Does your child need help organizing a schedule or is reading fluency the issue? There are many easy to-use products on the market that can help with studying, time management, organization, reading and writing. And, of course, many of them are fun to use.

Always make certain that software is compatible with your home computer. Know whether the manufacturer offers online tech support. Take a "test run" at the electronics store, and have the student try the various programs. Or, check the Website to see if the manufacturer offers a demo or a 60-day trial. Always consider whether a product is necessary, easy to understand and easy to operate. Will your child be likely to use it independently?

It is important to remind students that many of their teachers provide online assistance for particular courses. Sometimes the teachers have created specific study aids or refer students to links that can help them with particular skills or content. The Biology textbook, for example, comes complete with a CD tutorial and a website with many helpful exercises for each unit. Students have acknowledged that these have been an enormous help. Have the students share their WebClass or Web pages with you? There are also many resources, discussions and assignments online.

To support writing needs, one of the most valuable new tools is a portable word processor that is battery operated, lightweight, inexpensive and durable. It is great for note-taking and writing assignments. It can hold many separate files and they can be easily downloaded to a PC or Mac. Consult www.alphasmart.org for models such as the new Neo or the Dana. A more sophisticated option for older students (and more costly) is a tablet PC which types up what the student writes on the screen with a stylus. The tablet PC is a good tool for reviewing math problems and charts.

In the past few years, speech recognition software has improved. The technology allows the student to speak into a microphone and see those words on the computer screen. The preferred programs are *Dragon NaturallySpeaking 8* and *iListen* by MacSpeech. Both help students with good oral language skills who can't seem to transfer their ideas to pen and paper. *ReadPlease 2003* is a free download that reads scanned pages and Web pages. However, before investing in this type of software, we recommend that families explore this option fully with an educational specialist.

Don't forget the value of a tape recorder. A voice-activated, small recorder is best and easiest to use and is easily obtained from Radio Shack. Students can use the recorder in many ways: to record vocabulary terms and then play them back, to record terms for other subjects, and to brainstorm ideas for writing. Another popular aid is the software program called *Inspiration*, which helps students to visualize, think and organize ideas. By creating graphic organizers (mapping of ideas) that easily convert to the traditional outline format, *Inspiration* encourages learning in multiple modes. There is also a new component called *InspireData* that teaches and strengthens how to complete data analysis. Both programs offer a free trial download.



See www.inspiration.com/store. A current online program for building math strength can be found at *Aleks.com*. Many students find that portable electronic spell-checkers, advanced dictionaries and thesauruses are very user-friendly. They are small and inexpensive and are available in office supply stores or from www.franklin.com. With the proper cartridge, these can be used for foreign languages.

Some students qualify for Books-on-Tape from www.rfbd.org with recommendations from educational testing that support the need for such accommodation. We are currently experimenting with the iPod for reading assistance and fluency improvement. Students are now able to download a text from audible.com to an iPod and listen while following the text. We have also been discussing how we might assist students to brainstorm ideas or dictate answers on an iPod.

“Digital diversity” is becoming increasingly accepted as a means of personalizing instruction for all learners, because there is something to accommodate every learning style. If you need further discussion regarding assistive technology, please contact me or Michael Moulton for assistance.

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