

ALPHASMART NEO, SMALL BUT BEAUTIFUL

The day Francis Combe School and Community College in Watford entered a competition for new equipment was one of the best days in its life, according to deputy head Geoff Carr.

Not only because it won prizes worth thousands of pounds – but because, included in the goodies, was a teaching tool that has revolutionised literacy lessons there.

“It was only small”, says Geoff. “In fact, in its neat little zip-up bag it was almost inconspicuous. But in the months since it arrived its impact has far exceeded its size.”

What he describes as one of the finest teaching aids he has ever encountered is an AlphaSmart Neo, a robust, portable word processor that costs far less than a laptop but, in Geoff’s opinion, is 10 times more valuable.

Identifying the teacher who could best fully exploit it he handed it to Lorette Staff, Special Educational Needs Manager, who gives added attention to pupils ranging from those with special needs to the gifted and talented.

Lorette had reservations. There were few spare minutes in her day, it was technology she wasn’t used to, and she suspected she might end up giving it back.

But she took the Neo home for the week-end, studied the manual, saw it had great potential and came back declaring she could make very good use of it.

“And she wasted no time doing so”, says Geoff. “Because she had only one to play with she sat down to see how it could best be targeted then carefully identified particular students who could most benefit.”

Then she got them doing their literacy exercises on it, with up to 40 pupils having at least one session on it each week, typing away, creating, heads down, concentrating, applying themselves to work in a fashion and with a keenness she’d never seen before.

In a review a month after she'd introduced the Neo she was, Geoff says, "bursting with enthusiasm" at the impact it had made.

The reasons were many, but one of the most intriguing that pupils had given in their feedback was that it was so small as hardly to be noticed.

"It was interesting to find that some of the special needs pupils said they felt a laptop stigmatised them", Geoff explains. "Because it is pretty obtrusive, it is quite obvious when you are using one and they felt other children were saying, or at least thinking, 'They have special needs, so they have to have a laptop to help them'.

"It gave us an interesting psychological insight, but one of the main plus points for the Neo has proved to be that it is a subtle tool – it is compact and discreet and not an embarrassment to the user."

Another prime advantage the Neo has over the laptop, according to Lorette, is that it is very focused, being entirely and unswervingly dedicated only to word-processing: purpose-built for use in school, designed with classroom and pupil in mind, free of complications and distractions.

"It does not have all those bells and whistles and things we don't need that you find in a laptop and that can be a complete pain in the neck", agrees Geoff.

"With laptops, instead of concentrating, pupils can be tempted to wait for you to turn your back and go onto the net, or start playing games, or messing around with different fonts and applications. It's natural, but it doesn't help the learning process.

"The Neo is far less "precious", or pretentious if you like, than your far more expensive laptop – and unlike the laptop it so robust it will comfortably survive if you drop it.

"Furthermore it is so simple and undemanding that pupils quickly see that they are in charge of the equipment, rather than, as is so often with IT, feeling the equipment is in charge of them. So there is no reluctance, no seeking excuses not to use it."

It has proved so user friendly, says Lorette, that she finds even pupils with marked learning difficulties become familiar with it within minutes. The keyboard layout is straightforward, the fonts are a good, readable size, and each key is clearly explained.

“As an example, the backspace key is marked with the word “backspace”, rather than with the usual arrow. All right, you might say that is hardly rocket science, but it illustrates the concept of making it absolutely plain what the functions are that are being delivered, and what you are about to do and what you are doing, all in step by step stages.”

In turn, Geoff adds, that leads to enhanced creativity. “Pupils who have difficulties with handwriting or writing clearly can find that by the time they begin getting an idea down on paper it has begun to evaporate.

“With the Neo they can capture it in words immediately, then go back and check and edit without any untidy scribblings or crossings out, and of course they have checks for spelling and grammar.

“Even children with major learning difficulties have found themselves very comfortable with it, and are at last producing work they are rightly proud of and that gives them a sense of achievement.”

So is the Neo value for money? “I would go much further – I would say it is superb value for money”, Geoff says. “We’ve got one and up to 250 pupils have already used it, but I want to see us acquiring at least two more.

“Watch this space.”

ENDS

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For further press information, please contact: Kay Williamson or Tanya Herbert on kay@gravitaspr.co.uk or tanya@gravitaspr.co.uk. Gravitas PR 01242 211000