

ALPHASMART CASE STUDY

TAKING ICT INTO THE FIELD

Taking students on a field trip or away from the classroom environment usually means leaving ICT behind. Laptops are expensive, delicate and have a short battery life, and PDAs are beyond the budgets of most schools. So students have to take rough notes by hand and transcribe them when they return to their classroom.

Now an ICT teacher and Scout leader in north London has found a way to eliminate this laborious process and enable students to focus on gathering and sharing information. His solution is very affordable – less than one-third the cost of a basic laptop.

Shaun Joynson specialises in helping young people produce their own newspapers and newsletters, and his experience goes back to the days when cut and paste really did mean using scissors and glue!

These days computers make things more sophisticated. However, students still have to go out to gather the information, taking notes by hand before returning to type up their story. These documents are then transferred to the central computer or laptop on which the newsletter is being produced.

Shaun's solution is the AlphaSmart Neo - a low cost computer companion that is ideal for capturing data and writing. This has provided a completely different way of working.

At Scout camp, Shaun's students now take Neos out into the field, and type their stories directly into the machine. The Neo is light, easy to hold in one hand and has a long battery life. Most importantly, it is designed to be very robust, which makes it ideal for use in the field. Shaun's experience bears this out.

"The machines can survive the rough and tumble of a Scout camp with no problems, so you really don't have to worry about letting the Scouts take them out to write directly into them," explains Shaun.

The Neo also saves files automatically, so there is no danger of text getting lost – much to the relief of many an excited youngster.

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Scouts return to base with their stories already typed, and can quickly edit and complete their text. The process is quick and simple, and enables the youngsters to focus on the content of their stories. The days of trying to transcribe handwritten notes are a thing of the past.

Transferring the data to the central computer or laptop from the Neo is also easy, via a USB cable or the Neo's infrared link.

This solves an additional problem that arises at the Scout Centres which, as charities, rely on old computers that have been donated. Data had to be transferred from the old computers on floppy disc or CD. It often got lost or corrupted, which added hours to production time. Tempers got frayed and youngsters were demoralised. This made producing a newspaper, to quote Shaun, "a nightmare!"

The Neo makes the file transfer a matter of moments. "The Scouts were delighted to see the text flow smoothly from their Neos into the MS Publisher file holding the newsletter," said Shaun. "We also had none of the usual confusion created by using different versions of word processing packages."

Shaun is now using Neos in his school, and is recommending them to other schools as "superb tools in the classroom."

"You need the right tool to do the job in hand," says Shaun. "If that job is to write, whether newsletter articles or essays, or to make notes on a field trip, the tool you really need is the Neo."