

ALPHASMART CASE STUDY

“THE BOYS LOVED DOING THE WRITING...”

Boys' attitudes to reading and writing have been the focus of much Government and media attention recently. It is known that the difference between the sexes starts at an early age: for example, in England girls score consistently higher than boys in English all the way from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4. The difference is much less marked in maths and science.

The first challenge for teachers trying to address this is to hold the attention of everyone in their class and get them interested in the lesson.

However, could using ICT in English lessons change attitudes, particularly those of boys, and help teachers unleash pupils' creativity?

Caroline Coster, an English teacher at a middle school in rural Bedfordshire, certainly thinks so. In her experience, bringing ICT into English lessons improves both attitudes and performance.

In the first half of the autumn term this year, Caroline carried out an extended writing activity with her Year 7 class in which pupils were asked to write their own short story. As she did last year, Caroline organised it as a paired activity in which all the writing was completed directly onto AlphaSmart notepads, a low-cost, battery powered product halfway between a laptop and a PDA.

The response from her class, and particularly the boys, surprised her on both occasions – they loved doing the writing on the machines. Every lesson they asked her: “Are we using the AlphaSmarts today?” During the lessons pupils were completely focused on the task in hand, and the quality of work produced was extremely high.

Technology then enabled Caroline to take the exercise one step further. Everyone uploaded their work onto the school computer, and Caroline marked their work electronically using 'Track Changes'. The pupils looked at her suggestions, accepted the changes and pasted their work into a book. They then added their own pictures, either produced on computers or scanned in from their drawings.

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At half term Caroline printed off their books, and had them waiting on the pupils' desks when they returned. They spent the lesson reading each other's work and giving feedback.

"I was so surprised by the childrens' response, in comparison with the usual moans and groans, or at least lack of enthusiasm, when I set a writing exercise," said Caroline. "Using ICT meant the pupils were really able to focus on the content, and could get their ideas down quickly. They could also make changes to what they had written without the laborious process of crossing things out and rewriting.

"So many children use computers at home that they can often type faster than they can write. And using the AlphaSmarts meant they couldn't be distracted by the Internet, or waste time playing with WordArt, fonts, styles and colours to change the look of their document - they had to focus on their writing.

"ICT makes creative writing enjoyable for everyone in the class."

Caroline is now planning to use the AlphaSmarts in a unit on newspapers and advertising, and two more of the Year 7 English teachers have also begun to use the AlphaSmarts with their classes.