Autistic students find help with iPad

Zoom

Lainie Steelman

Ray Hart, an 11-year-old West Prairie South Elementary student, works on an iPad. An education app, "abcPocketPhonics," has helped Ray improve his writing.

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On a recent Monday morning at West Prairie South Elementary in Colchester, Ill., Ray Hart, 11, used a stylus to trace a small "t" on an iPad screen. After he successfully traced the letter, the tablet computer made a cheering sound. Ray looked up at his teacher, Lori Thompson, and smiled.

Working on the iPad, which was released by Apple in April, has helped Hart dramatically improve his handwriting and boost his confidence.

"The first time I showed this to one little guy — and he is verbal — he was able to start writing letters, and that's carried over into his paper work," Thompson said.

Most of the students in Thompson's special needs classroom have autism, a developmental disorder that makes communication and social interaction difficult.

"We're always looking for new ways to help our students come up with ways to communicate and be motivated," Thompson said. "We have another (non-verbal) student who uses an augmentative communication device that's very heavy and bulky and hard to carry around, so we were looking for an alternative."

Thompson's two iPads were received after West Prairie Superintendent Jonathan Heerboth suggested the idea.

"There was an article in the San Francisco Chronicle that talked about iPads as a useful communication tool for children on the autism spectrum who could not otherwise communicate," Heerboth said. "I knew that Mrs. Thompson had experimented with a similar idea on her iPod Touch."

After Thompson researched the idea, an Apple sales representative met with Heerboth, Thompson and one of her students after the new school year started in August. Soon, Thompson was able to buy two iPads — at a considerably lower cost than other augmentative communication devices.

"The other devices are from $3,000 to $5,000 dollars apiece," Thompson said. "iPads cost, depending on how much memory you get, $500 and up."

Thompson's non-verbal student uses the iPad with a text-to-speech application called Proloquo2Go. Using this application, Thompson's non-verbal student can easily participate in class and answer questions by touching the appropriate icon on the iPad, which then voices a response.

"If it's their day to be calendar helper, they can tell us," Thompson said. "They can pick the day of the week, they can tell me what the weather is (and) they can participate in the Pledge of Allegiance all by the touch, and that's very exciting for them."

Another application on Hart's iPad called ABC PocketPhonics not only teaches him how to write a letter, but it teaches him the sound. Stories2Learn teaches social cues, something kids with autism find difficult to pick up on. With this application, Thompson can create a simple story using a combination of photos and her own text that shows a specific skill, such as eye contact. If she chooses, Thompson can also narrate the stories with her own voice.

Thompson can create her own pages for the iPad. If she's doing a lesson on

spiders, for example, she can create a page about spiders in about 15 minutes.

“The apps are easy to download from iTunes and some other places as well,” Thompson said. “It’s a lot easier than some of the DynaVox (communication) systems I’m used to programming.”

Many of these applications can also be downloaded onto an iPhone or iPod Touch, and most are inexpensive. ABC PocketPhonics costs just $1.99 on iTunes, for example, and Stories2Learn is available for $13.99. Proloquo2Go, a more specialized application, costs $189.99.

The iPads stay in the classroom and do not go home with the students. They are recharged at the end of the day and, if needed, Thompson updates them with new material.

Kathy Olesen-Tracey, an educator with the Centre for Application of Information Technology at Western Illinois University, said current research is showing that the use of technologies such the iPad, and even smart phones like the iPhone, improves student test scores. She cited one recent study that showed high school students who used math applications with smart phones received higher standardized test scores in math.

Tracey says “assistive technology,” like the iPad, doesn’t replace teaching in classrooms, it reinforces it.

“You’re creating an entire network they can tap into,” she said.

The iPads in Thompson’s classroom have been so successful that she wants all of her students to have access to the technology.

“We’re working on trying to write a grant to get a couple more,” Thompson said.