Moderator: Welcome to the Jisc podcast. Jisc supports the Natspec technology advisory group which aims to promote the use of digital technologies for learners with learning difficulties. They have recently published some case studies highlighting how technology can promote and enable independence for students with more complex needs. Treloar College was one of those highlighted for excellent practice. We speak to Jane Hayden and Helen Cronshaw from the college to find out more.

Jane Hayden: Hello, I’m Jane Hayden. I am head of technology at Treloar’s School and College and I’m here with my colleague, Helen Cronshaw, who is head of learning technology.

Gemma Ellis: Can you tell me a bit more about the college please?

Jane Hayden: Treloar School and College are specialist education providers founded in 1907 by Lord Mayor Sir William Purdie Treloar. We have children through from primary age to their early 20s, all this severe physical disabilities. We mostly have students with cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy. A large proportion of our students use a wheelchair and nearly half of them have little or no speech. Additionally, a lot of our students have what we’d term complex access to technology requirements which needs input from a multi-disciplinary team which consists of our assistive technology department, our occupational therapists and our learning technology department.

Gemma Ellis: Can you tell me how you’re using technology in the assessment and feedback process?

Jane Hayden: We feel that our students should be actively involved in recording their own progress and achievements, and because of that we have made the effort to engage them by using technology. I think it really increases their enjoyment of a lesson and their participation in a lesson, and it’s something that for our students can really make a difference in how they access their lesson.
Helen Cronshaw  So also with the assessment there are many different forms. So we’re using the iPad predominantly within a classroom session, so the assessment can range from using it just to take a photograph of the student say cooking. It can be used to create a book of a whole session, so in science the teacher there is using it for recording science experiments. But also we’re using green screening for assessments, so we had a tutor who was studying the book Holes with the students, wanted to find out how the students had done and found that actually sitting round the table, obviously with our students with difficulties with communication, she wasn’t getting really good sort of assessment feedback. She knew that they knew the answers and could answer it. So we used green screening. We took some pictures from the film Holes and put the students in front of a camera with the pictures behind them and the verbal responses that she got were extraordinary. They were engaged in the whole assessment process and the feedback was so much more engaging and the quality was greater than just trying to sit round a table and get some just verbal feedback.

Gemma Ellis  That’s really interesting that you mention that multi-technology approach then. Was that something that was quite important, given that you’re a specialist college?

Helen Cronshaw  It is really important particularly if you’ve got students who have no verbal communication, it’s extraordinarily hard. What you end up doing when trying to assess is to ask yes/no questions. So, “Did you enjoy the book?” Yes/no. You wait for a response. And the assessment you get tends to be ... you don't get a good feeling of just how much the students learnt by asking yes/no questions. So when you’re using the technology, the video, the green screening, actually getting them to create something on an iPad, it’s all their own work. You know that everything that they’re doing is their own. It’s not because you’ve perhaps put an idea into their head or you’ve asked a question that’s a leading question. You know that that assessment is truly a reflection of the student’s progress and their own work.

Gemma Ellis  Can you talk to me a little bit about how you started to implement this new assessment and feedback process?

Helen Cronshaw  We’d looked at iPads and thought is there a way forward with this? We were then very generously given a donation by Damon de Laszlo to run a pilot project in using Windows tablets, android tablets and iPads to see which would actually serve the best needs of the students, and we ran this for a year. We were able to buy a significant number of iPads with that, so we were able to give them out to various classes to say, right use this and see how you go with it. And in fact giving a class a set of iPads ultimately is what we went for meant that all the students’ own work is on that, they have it for that whole session, they can take it out into the community, they can go elsewhere. We went down the iPad route mainly because students were coming with iPads. We felt that it would be extraordinarily difficult to change them to something like a Windows tablet. A Windows tablet in effect for many of our students would have been more suitable because with a Windows tablet you can add mice, keyboards, their own programmes, their own settings, but when they’re coming with their own and they’re already familiar with that, why change them, because any change for our
students is extraordinarily difficult. And the iPad has an extraordinary number of apps that are very, very good in the use of education. So we moved, as I say, from computers for many of our students over to the tablets because again they can be mounted to their wheelchairs with stands, they can be on their wheelchair trays. They can use them independently, and again what it’s meant is that in some situations instead of having to have one-to-one support to write down their assessments, to write down their work, the students can actually independently do that themselves. Even our users who can’t directly access an iPad, with Aisle7 came the ability to have switch access, and we’ve got some students who are just so skilled at using an iPad but with their switches, that again they are independently working and that’s what it was all about. That’s what the technology has enabled our students ... it’s enabled independent working.

Gemma Ellis

And what’s the feedback been from students?

Helen Cronshaw

The students are delighted to use the iPads and you rarely see students ... if they get the opportunity that’s what they will take first. Students now are wanting to use their ones from home in the class so they can take it home to show parents, family, exactly what they’re doing in class. So they love using the technology and as I say it has significantly increased the engagement within their learning process.

Gemma Ellis

That’s fantastic. And I know you had a team that was successful in our Summer of Student Innovation competition as well, so that’s all really positive. I don’t know if you can tell me more about that.

Helen Cronshaw

Yes, we asked the students what they felt an app would help them with in their life at Treloar’s and possibly beyond Treloar’s, and a group of students came up with this app called VoiceIt because they said there is no way for them independently ... if they’ve got a problem or an issue along the safety lines or bullying lines, that they always have to find a member of staff. Those again with communication difficulties have to find a member of staff, play the 20 question game, what’s the problem, try and sort out the issue. They felt that if there was an app that was symbolised for them, that had sort of a home page where you could select a category, so for example, cyber bullying, when you opened that page it would then lead you to another set of icons ranging from 'I’m being bullied by text', 'there’s a problem with my Facebook', things like that, they could then select the problem. Once they’ve selected the problem that would then email a message to their key worker or their tutor to say, “I’ve got a problem, I’m worried. I need to talk to you.” But if it was an urgent problem and needed our safeguarding manager, there was a button there that would email directly to or text directly to the safeguarding manager to say, “It’s an urgent problem and I need to see you and I need to see you now.” So it’s all done independently. As I say most of our students carry, whether it’s an iPad or an iPhone and it means that they’ve got that independent, again, it’s that independent ability to contact someone with an issue or a problem.

Again when we were developing that in Birmingham we took one of our students with us, she’s then said, “But there are some really good things that we like to tell other members of
staff that have happened during the day,” whether a good piece of coursework or an activity they’ve been on and, “Can we have a button on it that will actually allow us to give positive feedback as well.” So again that was taken into account in the design. So it’s not just a sort of app for negative issues and things. They want it to be used for positive things as well. But as I say it’s all about the independence.

Gemma Ellis

My final question was just about your plans for the future really, if you’re going to be extending use of the iPads, other technologies that you’re looking at, if there’s anything kind of on your radar that you’re exploring at the moment.

Jane Hayden

Well obviously you’ve heard from Helen about the wonderful things that she’s doing with the students and engaging the teachers, and that’s another significant aspect of it actually because it’s not just the students that are engaging, it’s the teachers as well and that’s been a significant hurdle. So we have just rolled out a salary sacrifice scheme to encourage our staff to purchase their own Apple items, be it an iPad or a MacBook, with the idea that they will potentially then become more familiar using an iPad. They can try out apps at home and things like that, and that’s been incredibly successful. We’ve had a large number of our staff sign up for that in the first phase and we’re planning to run it again halfway through next year. Obviously, as with everyone, bring your own device is a huge issue. Well it’s an issue and something that very much we want to move forward because no one has the funds to purchase a single device for every student, and for our students it’s not appropriate always for every student to have an iPad. So, where students or staff can bring their own equipment in, that’s a very positive thing, so it’s making that work and making that work well. And Helen at the moment has just bought an iPad Pro to do an assessment on that.

Helen Cronshaw

Yes, we looked at the iPad Pro and I’ve seen some of the reviews about it and thought that we would bring it in to try with the idea that you can actually ... Because you can now annotate photographs and things with the pen on there, when I work with assistive technology we go to classrooms, we look at students, we look at their setup and see if we need to make any changes with the way they access a computer, what difficulties lie there. We took the iPad Pro in the other day. We were able to photograph a student with various headrests, annotate that – if the headrest was in the wrong place or this is where it needs to be, and email that straight back to an OT who was then able to come and join us in the assessment and she helped to make further changes. We then recorded all of that through the video and the photographs and now there’s a full record of how we assessed and what work we did with the student and the changes that we needed to make. So that kind of technology, being able to annotate actually using the Pro’s stylus, being able to annotate your photographs and write your notes there and then is I think ... for us we were quite excited by that. Although it seems like such a small development in technology, actually, for our needs, it’s superb. Sometimes it’s the small technologies out there that actually can make a big impact in the way we work.

Gemma Ellis

Excellent, thank you. I don't know if there’s anything else that you particularly wanted to add or to draw attention to in this recording.
Helen Cronshaw  Well I suppose one of the other things that we’ve really utilised technology for and it’s made a difference, some of our students, because of the nature of their medical issues, go off for operations. They might be off for six weeks, eight weeks, so definitely long term sick, and in the past we haven’t actually, apart from the phone call from a tutor, been able to engage in the teaching and learning process. What we can do now is, with Skype and Facetime, they can actually join in. We have students joining in from home or from a hospital. A lesson or just a chat with the group or a chat with the teacher, but it’s all done through the video which again means that it doesn’t matter if they’re at home for six weeks, but the whole teaching and learning process - and they’re still engaged with their classmates - can still continue no matter where they are. And that again, that sort of technology is superb for us and the way we use it here.

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