



Reading, Writing, and Podcasting

If you're looking for top-notch entertainment on the Internet, check out the Apple iTunes store under "Podcasts" and then look under the unlikely link "Education." There you'll find an entry for Jamestown Elementary School in Arlington, VA, with a list of podcasts that students regularly produce, featuring recordings of poetry, stories, reports, and music. Some of the podcasts highlight photos and videos of the children's artwork, offering viewers a multimedia experience. You'll also learn a thing or two about trees, habitats, or even young children's ideas on peace.

Jamestown is one of the most active schools in Arlington Public Schools' integration of handheld technology to support the district's

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writing curriculum and the podcasts are the result of creating original content using Palm handheld computers.

"We decided to implement Palm handheld computers last year to support our K-5 writing program," says Camilla Gagliolo, Arlington instructional technology special-

ist. "We thought handhelds would allow students to complete the entire writing process using technology in their own classrooms, instead of in the computer lab. And now with the many options available for publishing their work, the project has become even more exciting."

An International Class

Arlington Public Schools is located across the Potomac River from the District of Columbia. The 19,000 students who attend the district's schools come from over 120 countries and speak more than 100 different languages. It's essential that the district offer a range of programs to meet individual needs of this diverse and sophisticated population. In order to challenge



Elementary schools create engaging language arts activities with Palm handhelds

BY GINA ADAMS PALMER

and educate each child, all district schools offer a rich and rigorous curriculum.

Instructional staff at the schools have developed school-wide writing and reading programs, engaged students in hands-on math and science projects like the Global Learning and Observation to Benefit the Environment (GLOBE), and implemented a wide range of technology tools to support teaching and learning. The district's Instructional Technology Services team supports the schools' efforts and spearheads the handheld implementation.

"Handheld computers offer exciting new opportunities for educators and their students," says Gagliolo. "Due to their low cost, versatility, and portability,

handhelds are accessible to more classrooms than traditional computers."

Between Classrooms

Arlington technology coordinators have developed classroom kits that include 10 Palm Tungsten handhelds for students, one for the teacher, keyboards, a TriBeam charger, and the GoKnow suite of education software, and Inspiration for Palm OS. The kits travel between classrooms in a school, where teachers stagger their times for the writing workshops. In each classroom, two desktop computers and often a laptop round out technology options. So far, six elementary schools are participating.

"It's the closest we can get right now to ongoing one-to-one access

to technology tools," says Gagliolo. "We found that it was more successful for classes to share a smaller set, but have more frequent access."

Schools have adopted the Writer's Workshop model from Lucy Calkins, Professor of Education at Teachers College in New York. Based on the modeling of lessons, children select writing topics and move through the writing process, including prewriting, writing, and revision.

They use Inspiration for Palm OS for prewriting activities and word study, and Documents to Go (from DataViz) and GoKnow's FreeWrite for drafting and revising. Students are very excited about the possibilities to share writing and to engage in peer editing through beaming or simply by car-

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rying their handheld to a friend's desk.

According to Lara Heubusch-Debnar, Jamestown Elementary teacher for a multi-age classroom of first and second graders, her children were a little apprehensive about using the handhelds for writing workshops in the beginning. "Once a few second graders picked them up and began using them, all the children wanted the experience," she says.

"Our teachers report increased motivation and enthusiasm for all their students, even their very reluctant readers and writers," says Gagliolo.

Jamestown teacher Helainie Ortiz also teaches a first-second combination. She finds her students are always excited when they know they can use the Palm handhelds during the writing workshop. "I have a student who couldn't write more than a few sentences, but when he uses FreeWrite on the handheld, he can finish a rough draft in one sitting."

Publish & Thrive

Teachers and students use the

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GoKnow PAAM Classroom Synchronization Manager to upload and access the writing and take it through the publishing process. When it comes time to publish student work, teachers are discovering many creative options. Their students might combine pictures and text once their story is on a desktop computer, and then print it out as a book. Jamestown has made its mark by helping students extend their writing projects with other publication options, like the podcasts, or videos and blogs.

To create the podcasts, students use audio and recording programs like Audacity, SoundStudio, and

Apple's GarageBand. They record their stories, poems, and reports, sometimes adding drawings or animations they've made in Sketchy to create a video cast. Then they can share these creations on iTunes, or on a special Web site, or over the school's TV-Video network.

In one podcast, third graders highlight an outdoor observation activity. First they took their handhelds outside to view the natural environment on their school grounds. After taking descriptive notes and drawing what they saw in Sketchy, they returned to the classroom and wrote stories from one of the tree's perspectives. They recorded their stories and combined them with their illustrations, creating an enjoyable listening and viewing experience that's now available on iTunes.

"The greater school community, especially parents, love the podcasts," says Gagliolo. "They like being able to see what students are creating."

Beaming Up

Palm handhelds are also being



integrated into Junior Great Books inquiry-based activities. Students record questions they have about a story the class is reading and then either beam them to each other or to their teachers, who can gather together all of the questions and print them out for class discussion.

In Ortiz's class, her first and second graders took their discussions on a book about frogs and their alligator king through the process to build a podcast. After writing and beaming questions about the story, the students created word Webblings of the frog's environment to help them understand the story. They then drew pictures using Sketchy and created audio voiceover of poems that related to the story and their drawings.

"My students find the Palm handhelds easy to use and manage," says Ortiz. "They know more about how to use some of the programs than I do."

Many K-2 teachers are using mCLASS Reading and mCLASS PALS (from Wireless Generation) on the handhelds to streamline the assessment of reading and early literacy skills. These applica-

For More Info

Arlington Public Schools
www.arlington.k12.va.us

Jamestown Elementary School
www.arlington.k12.va.us/schools/jamestown

Jamestown Podcasts
<http://slapcast.com/users/jamestown>

tions offer teachers a way to easily screen, diagnose, and monitor student progress.

"As a teacher who firmly believes that assessment guides instruction, I use mCLASS applications to help plan my reading and spelling instruction," says Heubusch-Debnar. "I can administer the assessments and record student responses on my handheld, and then upload the data to the Web where I can view reports, share them with parents, and use them to guide my teaching."

For the many teachers involved in the handheld project in Arlington Public Schools, they see technology as the future and they want to help their students be prepared.

"My students understand the many functions of the handhelds programs they use and they happily teach each other," says Heubusch-Debnar. "It may seem scary for some educators, but I'm happy to let go of the wheel and allow my students the opportunity to have the kind of amazing and authentic learning experiences they can have with technology. The excitement about writing and the enthusiasm to use the handhelds has made my program more successful and engaging."

"It's amazing to see the power of the technology at work with elementary students," says Gagliolo. "When you see young kids getting this involved and engaged in high-level activities, you have the right thing in their hands." ■

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