

Trends in Assistive Technology

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If you have recently upgraded your smart phone or purchased a new iPad or computer, you may not realize that a treasure trove of assistive technology resources is hidden inside. There are free and low-cost apps that can help people read, write, organize, and much more. “People now have at their fingertips amazing tools that they don’t realize can be so helpful to themselves or to students,”

said Joan Green, founder of Innovative Speech Therapy in Maryland, a provider of training and technology-based services for individuals with cognitive, learning, and communication challenges as well as the professionals who help them.

A driver behind this explosion of applications is the Universal Design For Learning (UDL) movement. UDL is a set of principles behind curriculum development that gives every individual equal access to learn.

Where to Start?

The first step is to figure out the student’s strengths and weaknesses. For students with a suspected learning disability, this means an evaluation to determine what is preventing them from accessing the curriculum or limiting their ability to show what they know. Assistive technology helps bridge the gap. (For more information on the design and delivery of assistive technology, see Sharing the SETT Framework at <http://joyzabala.com/Home.php>) Keep in mind, however, that assistive technology is helpful to many students, not just those with disabilities.

Next, look at the environment—such as college, home or school—in which the student is working. Green recommends that an IEC first identify what supports already exist. “It may be best to stick with resources that others in the environment already know how to use so they can effectively support the student,” she said. From there, identify the task the student is faced with. Is it reading comprehension, writing essays, or managing time? Then choose the tools to fit the task.

Tools You Can Use

There are hundreds of tools, including many you may be familiar with but have underutilized. A student with executive function challenges might want to start with Google Calendar. Green recommends that students use a digital calendar to log all their appointments, reminders, and task lists. Apps such as MyHomework sync across devices and may make the paper planner a historical artifact for many learners. Such apps hold course schedules and assignments. Some schools are using



a companion tool called *teachers.io* that allows students to access the syllabus, announcements and links to online school resources. Reminders that are based on location can be used so that a student can be reminded to take his backpack when leaving in the morning.

Google Chrome is another everyday tool that has many applications. Students distracted by Twitter, Angry Birds, or YouTube during homework time, can get an extension, such as StayFocused, that turns off access to the Internet during a preset period of time. English language learners and those with language-based learning or other challenges will benefit from Read&Write for Google (available on Chrome). Texts can be read aloud and the student can follow the color-highlighted text. Words are defined with text and picture dictionaries and can also be translated into other languages. As students type, they can set the app to predict the next word. It also works as a speech to text device. The helpful features of Chrome will be there on any

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computer when users log into their Google account, so there is no longer the need to load specialized software into the computer.

Other apps, such as Noteability, allow students to combine handwriting, typing, and photos to make projects and documents. It can be set to audio record as the students write or type during class so later they can hear what the teacher was saying at a given point in time. Another option for students who prefer the feel of writing with a pen is the Livescribe pen which will also record and sync audio as a student writes or draws. They can then share the “pencast” with others who may benefit from a review of what was said in class. Prior permission to record is essential. Most new devices also include options that will permit the student to dictate text if typing is difficult. In Chrome, visit the Chrome web store to add extensions and apps.

The Challenge of Keeping Up With New Technology

The technology world is moving so fast that people don't know what they don't know, according to Green. “Families are spending thousands of dollars on neuropsychological and educational evaluations and the area of assistive technology is often neglected in the recommendations.” These everyday tools are a boon to everyone. However, Green emphasizes that people with disabilities have the right to be exposed to these mainstream tools that not only make them more productive, but also happier and more successful.

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