

# ASK THE EXPERT: SEN

**LAUREN SUTCLIFFE** HAS SOME ADVICE FOR A TEACHER WHO'S STRUGGLING TO SEE THE POINT OF TECHNOLOGY IN HER ENGLISH CLASSROOM...

Q

I have been an English teacher for more than 15 years now and of course, during my career I've seen a lot of changes. One of the most obvious ones in recent years has been a rather sudden increase in the emphasis placed on the importance of using technology in as many lessons as possible. This is not something that comes easily to me, but my SLT is now placing a good deal of pressure on me to demonstrate that it is something I am doing, especially in terms of supporting my SEN learners. Please, could you help me overcome my natural reluctance?

A

I can certainly reassure you that you're not alone – ICT is one of those things we either seem to love or hate. Personally, though, I have always loved using technology with my students. Now don't get me wrong, I am no techie. The thought of spreadsheets in Excel scares the living daylights out of me and I have, on more than one occasion, got the IT guys to come and help me with a system failure of an unidentifiable nature, only to realise I haven't plugged the machine in (always embarrassing).

Despite the personal hurdles I face with ICT, though, I have always been enthusiastic in using it in my lessons because it can be such a powerful tool to engage and motivate students to learn, as they find it so exciting. But the thing that thrills me the most is its ability to provide every single student with an opportunity for independence at some level.

Independence is something most of us take for granted every day. But some of my students live in a world in which, from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep they are at the mercy of the adults around them. They rely on others for all their physical needs and it is impossible to overestimate the power, importance and positive impact any fleeting moments of independence can have on their quality of life. Technology, when used correctly, can give students a voice and enable them to find some security and sense, in what can be a very uncertain and scary world.

Early in my career, I taught a girl with Cerebral Palsy. She was extremely bright and had a wicked sense of humour; she



never failed to laugh when I fell over (which seems to happen often). Yet I found it extremely difficult to find ways to enable her to achieve her true potential. She had no language and very little physical mobility but could turn her head and use her right arm to press a switch. Using 'Choose It', software designed for students with learning difficulties, I could upload pictures and symbols linked to our lessons and she could answer questions with that switch. This way, I could capture her achievements and get a clearer picture of her true cognitive ability, without her physical difficulties holding her back. The satisfaction she gained from working independently was unmistakable and it was an extremely powerful experience for me as a young teacher.

Or there's my current student, who was unable to focus on any activity without adult attention when I started with the class in September. Now, he congratulates himself by cheering when he gets the musical reward for getting the right answer in cause and effect

activities on the touch screen.

Whichever type you use – and there are many – technology put to effective use can provide an opportunity for students of all levels of ability to access their education with increased independence. So perhaps you could ask your SLT about some relevant training that might inspire you rather than fill you with dread... and meanwhile, I'll continue to explore new products and software with excitement to support my teaching, whilst still breaking out in hot sweats when Excel is mentioned in meetings. You can't be good at everything...

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lauren Sutcliffe is a teacher mentor at the Swiss Cottage School Development and Research Centre, a specialist SEN school for children aged 2-19, and a Teaching School, helping to raise the standards of teaching and learning in London and beyond.