

Giving Students with Special Needs Autonomy Over their Learning

SMART solutions for promoting accessibility



Before learning can truly begin, it's essential that students have the tools they need to engage and participate in their lessons. For teachers and administrators who work with students with special needs, technology plays a key part in this.

Lauren Stafford is vice-president visual learning solutions at Monarch Teaching Technologies, Inc. (vizZle), in Shaker Heights, Ohio. She sees the SMART Board® interactive whiteboard as means to help students engage in lessons and express knowledge.

"Technology is key to all of our children's future. For students at Monarch School for Autism specifically, it helps level out the playing field," she says. "If you take children who are locked inside of their minds, who aren't communicating, and you put technology like a SMART Board in front of them, all of a sudden they have a way of telling us who they are and what their interests are. They have a way of opening doors to education that just weren't there before."

The power of visuals

Stephanie Coates is a fourth-grade teacher Hickory Ridge Elementary School in Brunswick, Ohio. She teaches in an inclusion classroom that has students with a range of needs, several of whom are on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). One of the key challenges she faces is being able to present concepts so that every student in her class can understand them. The visual capabilities of the SMART Board interactive whiteboard are helping her be more successful at this.

"Many of my students don't have a lot of prior knowledge or experiences and sometimes when we're creating lessons we assume they know what we're talking about but they might not," Coates says. "That's why the visual component is so important with the SMART Board. We can pull up pictures for some of our struggling students, so even if they don't have that background we can physically show them what we're learning about."

Challenge

Students with special needs have a range of different needs and ability levels. For teachers in the field, it can be difficult to create lesson activities that support the needs of all of their students while accommodating their varying ability levels.

Solution

Incorporating SMART products into the classroom has given special education teachers the ability to tailor their lessons to support the learning needs of their students. The products have also provided them with the flexibility to create learning scenarios where every student can participate, regardless of their ability level.

Results

By discovering new ways to access learning, students with special needs are beginning to take more responsibility for their own learning and feel more included in the learning process.

Coates also uses the SMART Board and the SMART Table® interactive learning center to foster collaboration and small-group learning in her classroom.

“One of the fundamental instructional strategies we use is small-group learning. If I’m working with a group on the SMART Table, I can put another group at the SMART Board,” Coates says. “While each group is working amongst themselves, I have the flexibility to hone in on the group that needs my attention.”

The result is a more engaged class with students who are able to take responsibility for their own learning by using tools like SMART Notebook™ collaborative learning software.

“SMART products have allowed my students to lead their own instruction. It allows them to have autonomy over their learning,” Coates says. “For example, the self-checking components of SMART Notebook lessons allow students to answer a question and then press a button or an object to find out if they were correct. I don’t need to tell them if it’s right or wrong. Their interaction with the SMART Board tells them that and helps them become more independent learners.”

Reaching every student

One of the challenges that teachers face during group learning activities is the students’ varying needs and ability levels. Meredith Opatrny, an intervention specialist at Monarch School for Autism, says her SMART products are helping her foster group learning, while still accommodating different ability levels.

“I teach different grade and ability levels, so it can be difficult to pair two or three students together because they are working on completely different things,” Opatrny says. “But when we do things on the SMART Board, you can tie things in for a whole class to do at different levels. You can work with one student who simply needs to attend to the task while another student can be working on answering the questions.”

One of the benefits of this, says Opatrny, is that every student is then able to participate in the lesson.

“We have a student in my class this year who we’re working with on attending to a task,” Opatrny says. “So when we’re doing an activity on the SMART Board, I make sure he is coming up to it, just to touch, write or move something. Then he is much more likely to attend to the lesson because he is seeing his peers getting up and doing similar things. He feels included.”

Opatrny says being more involved in lessons and taking responsibility for their own learning has had many benefits for the students, including giving them more confidence to communicate in class.

“We’ve taught our students to use Microsoft PowerPoint® to create presentations,” Opatrny says. “They come up to the front of the classroom and they’re able to present to everybody on the SMART Board. It’s fantastic to see them have the confidence to stand up in front of people and give a presentation.”



Students at Hickory Ridge Elementary School work together around the SMART Table interactive learning center.

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Lauren Stafford

Vice-president visual learning solutions at Monarch Teaching Technologies, Inc. (vizzLe) Shaker Heights, OH

About SMART

SMART Technologies is a leading provider of collaboration solutions that transform the way the world works and learns. We believe that collaboration and interaction should be easy. As the global leader in interactive whiteboards, we bring more than two decades of collaboration research and development to a broad range of easy-to-use, integrated solutions that free people from their desks and computer screens, so collaborating and learning with digital resources are more natural.

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