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Literacy.

6 tips for tech-enabled instruction in the early literacy classroom

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Teachers in K–3 classrooms may be wary of technology, but with the right approach it can enable and extend teacher-led instruction



There are plenty of reasons that K–3 teachers tend to be less likely than their middle and high school peers to use technology in the classroom. From their focus on hands-on learning to a lack of district-provided devices in the lower grades, the reasons are both pedagogical and budgetary. However, by incorporating technology into their classrooms, K–3 teachers can add flexibility and personalization to their instruction—and even get some of their own time back.

That said, not all technology is created equal, and even well-made tools can be counterproductive when used improperly. Here are a few tips and tricks for integrating technology into your reading lessons.

1. Get to know the tech you already have.

For teachers who would like to use more technology in their classrooms, the first step I suggest is to get to know your existing technology as well as possible.

This was a lesson I had to learn early in my own career. When I was a new teacher, there was a program we were all supposed to use in class for a certain number of hours each week, and I made sure that my students met those requirements—but I didn't really have any idea what they were doing.

When I finally took some time to look into it, I realized that, although it was a pretty great program, it was missing some important concepts. Also, while I thought most of the lessons were fantastic, there were a few that I just didn't think held much value for my students. Once I understood where the program was effective and where it was less so, I was able to compensate by spending more time on the pieces I thought it didn't handle well or missed altogether. I could just check for proficiency on the material I thought it did well to see how much additional instruction was needed, if any.

Even for something that seems like it should be plug-and-play, like an assessment, it's enlightening to dive in and see what the program is doing. What are the items? How are they worded? What do students actually see as they interact with it? What are they asked to do?

2. Choose tech that works as an extension of you.

So much of the technology marketed to educators these days is designed to work by itself. We're supposed to just plug it in and let it do the rest. But an iPad can't wipe a nose, notice that a student seems distracted, or give a hug when it's needed. As advanced as they are, computers can't be sensitive to what children need in a given moment.



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The most effective technology works *with* you to enable or extend the instruction you're providing. In small-group work, for example, students can do so many things with technology, such as reading aloud, practicing decoding, doing a word sort, or practicing dictation.

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Technology should enable your teaching, rather than replace it. While good classroom technology can suggest the most effective activities for students who need practice in a particular area, *you* still make the ultimate decision.

3. Use tech to focus on your students.

These days my teaching is at the college level, but I've found that at least one challenge never changes, regardless of the age of the students: There is so much to pay attention to all the time! When I'm presenting to the class, I have to focus on what I'm doing and still be aware of how my students are interacting and responding.

One great use of technology is to get students engaged so that the teacher can focus on the students. For ELA teachers, simply projecting decodable text on a screen at the front of the room and asking students to read it out loud frees the teacher to walk around the room, observe students' facial expressions, and listen to their pronunciation. Or you can reverse this by having your phone dictate a list of words for students to write down while you walk around the room; this allows you to focus on what your students are doing and thinking instead of having to read words aloud from the front of the class.

4. Take advantage of tech's ability to track progress and suggest activities.

Teachers spend so much time outside of work doing things like grading and trying to find appropriate activities for differentiated instruction. Reliable software can do a lot of that heavy lifting for you—if you let it.

If students are using software for daily practice, for example, that program should keep track of their progress and provide you with that information. This means that you don't have to go home to grade everything, look for common gaps in understanding revealed by the incorrect answers, and determine your next steps (such as more whole-class instruction or small-group work). Because the software has already made all of that visible, you can make data-based decisions without the need to parse and arrange all the data first—which means you can go home to your life!

And software can help with decisions on next steps as well. Many teachers find it hard to identify engaging and effective activities for specific skills practice, especially for a whole class of students. While you're still in control of choosing differentiation activities, software is really great at making suggestions, especially very specific ones. If you can simply choose from a list targeted to the needs of each student, you'll get a lot of your evenings and weekends back, which will be healthier for everyone in the classroom.

5. Use tech to pre-teach.

One of my favorite ways to use technology in the classroom is to prepare students whom I know will need a double dose of a particular concept. Introducing students to a new idea or skill via software is a great, low-stakes way to get them familiar with an idea so they hit the ground running when you introduce it to the whole class.

Giving these students a head start means that they are familiar with a new concept, so it feels a bit less intimidating when it's time to work with the rest of the class. In addition, the multiple opportunities to practice these skills—before and after classroom instruction—means that they are more likely to stick in a student's long-term memory. For example, there are a lot of technological resources that provide students with opportunities to practice reading and sorting words in a game-like manner. This type of computer-based activity can also foster automatic word recognition for students while providing teachers with student data such as words read correctly per minute and percentage of accuracy.

6. Take it slow.

Finally, I suggest that you learn one piece of technology at a time and get to know it well enough to be totally comfortable with it. Remember, technology should *enable* your teaching, not *replace* it. To do that, the technology needs to feel as comfortable for you to use as a hammer feels to a carpenter.

I wouldn't say we should go 100 percent "all in" on technology. It is still critically important for young students to read physical books they hold in their hands. They still need a teacher to care for and guide their learning. But if teachers can get a bit of help from technology, they'll be more available to every child in their class.

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