

Shutterfly

First Hope Case Study
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Shutterfly Photo Story for Classrooms Gives Students with Special Needs a New Channel of Communication

First Academy's First Hope program uses interactive iPad app to help students harness creativity and writing skills

At First Academy's First Hope program, an interactive iPad app isn't just cultivating creativity and writing skills – it's helping students with special needs communicate through digital self-published books.

Based in Orlando, Florida, First Hope provides a 2:1 student-teacher ratio and offers different therapies, including sensory, occupational and speech, during a standard school day. The special needs program also embraces technology, with students using iPads as "open gateways for education and communication."

"Autism steals that communication," said Laura Johnson, an exceptional student education teacher at First Hope. "It attacks social skills, and it can be difficult for some students with autism to just say, 'Do you want to play with me?' Photo Story opens doors where they can share a little bit more about themselves and communicate in ways they haven't been able to before."

When Johnson heard that Photo Story for Classrooms would allow her two first-grade students to take pictures with their iPad and compile those memories into a book to share with others, she knew she had to try it.

Empowering students

Johnson introduced Photo Story for Classrooms through a semester-long storytelling project. She asked her students and their parents to take pictures of meaningful moments throughout the weekend. During English instruction, Johnson then asked the students to describe the pictures and type those descriptions into sentences on their iPads. The result was a refreshingly streamlined writing process for both students.

The app helped one of the students jump hurdles in the writing process and share her passion for animals with classmates.

"She didn't have to think, 'I have the question, I have the answer, now how do I put a sentence together, now how do write?' All of those four steps put her behind her counterparts, which lowers her self-esteem and self-confidence," Johnson said. "The writing process with Shutterfly Photo Story gave her the ability to open up, share her love of her pets, and say to her classmates, 'Look what I created on my iPad.'"

Photo Story for Classrooms enabled another student to use his iPad for a creative writing project. Since he isn't comfortable maneuvering a mouse and has difficulty using a pencil to write, the iPad's touchscreen keyboard allows him to focus on the task at hand.

"For the first time, he can participate in writing projects with his peers," Johnson said.

By using visual aids to simplify sentence building, the iPad app ultimately improved both students' writing ability and creativity. The project also transformed students into authors – even if they didn't realize it until they saw the tangible result at the book presentation.

"Their expressions were priceless," Johnson said. "Every time I reiterated that they were authors, I saw big smiles."

Extending learning into summer and beyond

For one of the students, Photo Story for Classrooms will turn into Photo Story at home. To keep her writing skills sharp, her mother plans to help her complete two family projects over the summer, as well as introduce the new Doodle drawing feature.

With an enrollment of 30 students, First Hope is planning to integrate the iPad app into its school-wide curriculum next year. The goal is to have each student complete two books – real, tangible books – each year.

"For the parents alone," Johnson said, "it's going to be something they probably never expected to have."