

BOOK REVIEW

Assistive Technology in Special Education: Resources to Support Literacy, Communication, and Learning Differences

Joan L. Green

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Reviewed by [Ana-Isabel Martínez-Hernández](#)
anhernan@uji.es
Universitat Jaume I, Spain

Assistive Technology in Special Education by Joan L. Green (2018) delves into technology, i.e. apps, websites and devices, to boost learning in students with special needs. With the rise of new technologies in the field of education, many students with disabilities are left behind. Thus, this book intends to show how to use those technologies to make learning easier for physically and mentally challenged students to help them overcome learning difficulties and improve their quality of life. Not only does this book suggest cutting-edge technology, but also everyday gadgets and apps which were not originally created with therapy goals in mind, but end up being so if used correctly, along with state-of-the-art solutions.

This book is addressed to teachers, schools, speech-language pathologists, therapists and families who want to maximise the students' learning potential and overcome barriers such as concentration issues, speech impairment or comprehension among others. Although many of the resources found in this book can enhance learning in students with special needs, and in many cases withdraw this support gradually to aid them become independent, learners with no difficulties can find these resources beneficial in their learning process as a route to empowerment in order to become the masters of their own learning and promote autonomous learning. Nevertheless, despite encouraging families to use technologies with challenged students and applauding families who already do so, the support and guidance of professionals is highly recommended throughout the book; what Green strongly endorses is the idea of therapists, families and teachers working in unison to benefit the student.

It cannot be denied that technology has become rather overwhelming in the past decade with the plethora of available resources, i.e. apps and websites, which together with the myriad of different devices at our disposal in the market can make of this advantage, i.e. technology, a cumbersome and time-consuming process in which families and professionals can get lost, and therefore many might regard it as a setback rather than a step forward. In this book, one of Joan L. Green's purposes is to make a selection of the best resources to narrow down all the available apps and sources, a "representative sampling" (2018: 10) as she calls it, classifying them by function in order to help families and professionals filter all the resources at hand.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, the first three of which are dedicated to the introduction of assistive technology and its future in helping students. The following chapters contain more detailed information about improving specific learning skills, closing with a call to a responsible use of the resources in the final chapter. All of these chapters include an enumeration of recommended apps, devices and websites which are accompanied by a short description and review of the product with the main characteristics as well as the operating system it works on and the price, with the intention of helping "readers save time, frustration and money" (2018: 25). In this sense, this book could be used as a resource book for those educators, families and therapists who would like to develop a learner's skill to exploit their potential or cover a specific need.

The book starts with a 'reality check' on the current situation of technology, namely hardware and software, which implies being aware of all the pros and cons it has to offer, as well as the reasons for the author to write a third edition of this book regardless of its transient, thus perishable, nature of which she is aware and is repeatedly mentioned throughout the pages. In the first chapter, Green encourages people to use technology that is no longer expensive and is easily available in order to increase success and independence for people with communicative, learning and cognitive disabilities. She tries to achieve this by answering some of the most frequently asked questions among the teachers' and parents' communities first, guiding the readers through the procedure to be followed should they need to find a solution to a learner's impediment. Along these lines, notwithstanding the existing barriers to technology for

some challenged individuals, the focal point of Chapter 2 is on how beneficial the shift towards technology can be in assisting all students, but especially for those with challenges. The author refers to the advantages, but also to those obstacles and disadvantages technology may still present for students with an impairment or disability, although the advantages clearly outweigh the disadvantages. Chapter 3 reinforces the idea of technology as a means towards independence for individuals with special needs with the sole aim of overcoming the existing hindrance. In this chapter, the author offers some guidance to assist families and professionals with device choice by offering a review of two of the most popular operating systems on mobile devices. The chapter that follows (Chapter 4) focuses on improving verbal expression, namely intelligibility and expressive language, encouraging a diagnosis of the obstacle and offering strategies and useful technology tools to tackle it. Chapter 5 introduces AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication), which helps boost communication needs, and offers a list of resources to learn more about AAC as well as apps, devices, and other options to help individuals communicate. The author contrasts former solutions to AAC and the current ones, which oftentimes are already installed on our phones by default, the reader only needs to be creative about how they are applied. Chapter 6 reviews tips, strategy, apps and resources to improve listening skills – i.e. auditory comprehension, processing deficits and receptive language – such as captioning, assistive devices or websites with free listening activities among others. The resources mentioned in this chapter may also result profitable for those students learning English as a second language (ESL). Chapter 7 has to do with reading comprehension, in which the author emphasises tools which are key to developing this skill which is paramount for academic success. The most prominent feature to bolster reading comprehension mentioned throughout the chapter, be it apps or software on other devices, is text-to-speech, although many others are mentioned. Additionally, Chapter 8 unravels ways technology can be used to enhance reading skills in an engaging way, being mobile apps and websites the top suggestions. Chapter 9 deals with improving written expression, and the writer insists on the use of assistive technology to make life easier and to empower the learners in order to show what they know in a different way with the aim of counteracting a challenge. Chapter 10 is also connected to writing skills, although it offers guidance to acquire more essential skills.

It focuses on spelling and how to draw letters correctly at the outset and goes on to more complex aspects like punctuation and sentence-building towards the end of the chapter. Chapter 11 addresses the issue of attention, cognition, and executive function, i.e. how we pay attention, organise, remember and learn effectively and efficiently. The author suggests some technological and non-tech solutions to aid students in their learning by helping them to stay focused (e.g. calendars) and how to use those solutions effectively. Chapter 12 nourishes the idea of using digital resources and mobile phones to support learning new information, yet it encourages the combination of traditional and contemporary approaches to avoid unnecessary digital distractions. Chapter 13 presents everyday tools to enhance organisation and collaboration. In order to help students dodge the unpleasant situation of forgetting homework at home, the writer suggests online storage such as Dropbox or Google Drive which has become commonplace and most students are familiar with them. On the other hand, to foster collaboration among peers chatting tools such as WhatsApp and online collaboration tools like Google Docs are suggested. These are only some of the examples of those mainstream tools students have already been acquainted with that can be used creatively to provide students with special needs with solutions. Chapter 14 supports the use of apps and online programmes to practise cognitive skills and offers a list of those the writer found most effective. However, competition against peers is discouraged, as it can result in demotivation. The purpose of these ‘games’ is to improve the last result and track the student’s progress. Finally, Chapter 15 closes the same way the book opened: with a ‘reality check’. It reminds the reader to teach students to use technology responsibly warning of all the dangers of the Internet, but also of the benefits if used correctly, which at the same time will prepare them for their future, that is, the chapter aims to promote digital citizenship and safety on the net.

All things considered, the book is a fantastic reference book which leads you to think about the students’ needs at all educational stages. It is definitely a helping hand for families but more so for us, teachers, and professionals: an excellent handbook, but above all, it is a stepping stone towards inclusion and accessibility in education.

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