

SylvanSync Reflection

Description

As an instructor for Sylvan Learning Center in Fairlawn, Ohio, two of the subjects that I teach are Math Essentials and Academic Reading. Beginning in the summer of 2012, our center started using the SylvanSync iPad app to deliver these two programs. SylvanSync is a proprietary app that was developed by Sylvan Learning, Inc. for the exclusive use in its learning centers. SylvanSync is not available to the general public. Each student has an individualized set of lessons in SylvanSync, based on the results of pre-assessments and regular progress assessments. Teachers log into the SylvanSync app and then tap on the student's name to access their learning program. Students come for one-hour or two-hour instructional sessions. Teachers have 2-3 students at their table during each hour, and teachers use one iPad for each Math Essentials or Academic Reading student. Often I will have at least one student at my table who is enrolled in another program that does not use SylvanSync, such as Beginning Reading or Study Skills.

SylvanSync is designed around student mastery of math or reading skills. Within each student's individualized program, each objective consists of a pretest, a guided practice, and independent practice exercises. Each lesson in the Math Essentials program also includes an applied practice exercise and mastery tests. Some Math Essentials students are also assigned computation practice to help them master basic math facts. Teachers help students progress through their program by teaching the guided practice lessons, while giving students the chance to complete independent practice assignments. Teachers score guided practice lessons as excellent, good, or poor and type feedback directly on the iPad. Teachers grade pretests and independent practice exercises using percentages directly on the iPad. Students can master objectives by completing a guided practice lesson and three independent practice exercises with scores of at least 80 percent on each exercise. Students can also master lessons by scoring at least 80 percent on the pretest.

In addition to using SylvanSync at the center in Fairlawn, I have also taught students using the app at two satellite locations in Barberton and Tallmadge. I would sign out the iPads from the cart at the Fairlawn center and take them to the satellite location. Once there, I would plug in a wireless router to access the server back at the center. At the satellite locations, I would help troubleshoot issues with accessing the Wi-Fi by checking the settings and install updates to the SylvanSync app and the Apple iOS operating system. In addition to the two satellite locations, I also teach using the app at the Summit County Juvenile Court building as part of a program for at-risk students.

Impact

We started using the SylvanSync iPad app at our center in Fairlawn in May 2012, about the same time that I enrolled in the Instructional Technology Master's program. At that time, SylvanSync was still in beta mode, and it was being tested by several centers across the country. Prior to SylvanSync, the Academic Reading and Math Essentials programs were taught using pre-printed lesson cards that were put in students' binders with corresponding assignments out of math or reading workbooks. The Math Essentials program also featured Distributive Practice cards to measure

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retention of skills and manipulatives to help students model and visualize math concepts, such as base ten blocks, fraction tiles, fraction circles, counters, and geoboards. While students' learning programs were managed using computer software, there was no digital technology involved in the teaching of the Math Essentials or Academic Reading programs.

SylvanSync represented a major step in my teaching career because I had never used iPads before as a teaching and learning tool. I had experience using SmartBoards and computers as a middle school teacher, but not iPads. When we had both online and in-person training about how to use the app, I was excited for several reasons. First, I liked that students could be immediate feedback by tapping the Reveal or Show Answer boxes on the guided practice exercises. This feature is helpful because it helps me assess as a teacher how well students are learning a new skill and whether or not I need to explain something in a different way. Second, I liked that the answers to the independent practice exercises were included directly on the app. If a teacher puts two fingers on the middle of the iPad, then the screen flips and a Grade button appears in the corner. Teachers can then check answers to each question or problem by marking them with a green checkmark or a red X. This feature is very helpful because, prior to SylvanSync, I had to look up the answers in the back of a workbook, on a separate answer key, or on the back of a math Distributive Practice card. Third, I liked that teachers could type comments both for each lesson and at the end of the instructional hour directly on the iPad. This feature was helpful because it eliminated the need for communication logs in students' binders where teachers had to write out comments by hand. As I have used SylvanSync for the last two years, I have often found myself typing out more detailed comments on the iPad than what I previously did when writing them out by hand. This feature increases the communication among teachers because teachers can read comments and notes left by instructors who taught the student the last time he or she came to the center. Teachers can use this feedback to guide their teaching. This feature also helps teachers provide feedback to the center director, who can make changes to a student's learning program based on the comments left by teachers on the SylvanSync app.

As I have used SylvanSync on a regular basis over the last two years, I have realized even more that technology will never replace a good teacher. I realize that technology does not teach students - good teachers teach students and help students achieve to their highest potential. SylvanSync is at the lowest end of the **SAMR** model of technology integration - **substitution**. By using SylvanSync, students are not really completing any different tasks than before. Instead of completing exercises from workbooks, exercises are delivered to students in digital format on the iPad. Instead of writing answers to math problems in their notebooks, students in Math Essentials write their answers on the iPad. In fact, I encourage math students to work out the problems in their notebooks and just write their final answers on the iPad. I especially encourage middle school and high school students to work out problems in their notebooks, since their problems are usually longer and have more steps. Since SylvanSync is just a digital form of delivering instruction, I have had to think of creative ways to engage students and motivate students to do their best work while using the features that come with the app. One example is that I always highlight important words or concepts when teaching a guided practice lesson. There is a highlighter tool at the top of each exercise, along with other tools such as pencils, shapes, and an erase. Another example is

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that I always try to relate a new skill back to a student's prior knowledge or prior experience at school. In some cases, I can relate a new skill back to previous skills the student has worked on at Sylvan by looking at the main menu of lessons that are in progress in their program. Another example is by always reviewing the instructions for a particular exercise with a student before he or she starts to work. As I have used SylvanSync for the last two years, I have frequently seen exercises where there is one set of instructions for the first part of the exercise and another set of instructions for the second part. Sometimes the instructions are complex and have many different steps, so I want to set students up for success and don't want students to miss questions or problems just because they did not understand the directions. I also use the Sylvan motivation program to reward students. Each hour, students earn tokens for doing well on assignments, staying on task, asking good questions, and doing problems in new ways. I award between 5-10 tokens for each student each hour. Students can use these tokens to purchase items from the Sylvan store. Even though our math and reading instruction switched to a digital platform with the introduction of the SylvanSync app, I have not abandoned the "best practice" strategies of giving students positive feedback, connecting new skills to prior knowledge, creating a positive environment for learning, guiding students to achieve mastery, and motivating students with positive rewards. Just like the TPACK model illustrates, I cannot ignore the content knowledge that I need to share with my students and the learning theories and management strategies that drive effective teaching and learning. Content, pedagogy, and technology are equally important!

Intent

As long as I continue to work at Sylvan, I will continue to use the SylvanSync app to teach Academic Reading and Math Essentials. In the future, I will continue using the different features within the app to maximize student learning (e.g. immediate feedback, highlighting tool, dictionary and thesaurus word look-up) and leaving detailed comments about student success for the benefit for my teaching colleagues and the center directors. In addition, I will continue to find teaching strategies that work for individual students to maximize the goal of providing students with differentiated instruction at Sylvan. Also, I will continue to model and promote the appropriate use of the iPad with the students at my table. This includes keeping the iPad on the table (so it doesn't fall), keeping food and drinks on the floor (so nothing spills on the iPad), keeping written comments professional, not changing the settings without permission, and returning the iPads to the cart at the end of the night. Also, I will continue the practices of building rapport with students by learning about their interests at school and outside of school and providing constructive feedback focusing on weaknesses and strengths.

This summer, our center is in the process of implementing a new Study Skills program that will be part of the SylvanSync app. Over the next several weeks, I will be completing the online training to learn more about the Study Skills program and be certified to teach it to our Sylvan students. Since our current Study Skills program integrates technology on a limited basis, I am very excited about this development. In the current Study Skills program, students use computers at the center to do research projects, type assignments, and use a software program called ACE Reader that helps

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students measure their reading speed and comprehension by reading a series of leveled passages. I am also excited that our Study Skills students will get to use the iPads just like our math and reading students. Even though the Study Skills program on SylvanSync will be new for me, I hope to take a leadership role and support my teaching colleagues as they learn the program, too. I realize that it will take everyone some time to feel comfortable teaching the program, including me, but I want to make sure that all of my colleagues know that they can come to me for support.

I have seen some training lessons for the new Study Skills program that are currently installed on the SylvanSync app. While I like that the Study Skills program will now be available in a digital format, I am somewhat concerned that the program does not go far enough at integrating 21st-century tools that can help today's students improve their organization, time management, note taking, goal setting, and information literacy/research skills. While some of the training lessons focus on digital literacy, such as evaluating websites and finding credible Internet sources, I wish that there were additional apps installed on the iPad that could supplement instruction using the SylvanSync app, such as apps that could help students take notes or create graphic organizers. Study Skills students will still have to be responsible enough to bring their planner, textbooks, homework assignments, and study materials to each session at the center. Students will still have to use these homework assignments, textbooks, and notes to complete application assignments for the objectives they will be completing on the iPad. These expectations will not change just because students will be using an iPad. Even though students might not be able to use websites or apps during their Study Skills sessions at Sylvan, I can always give students suggestions about what online or mobile resources might help them complete assignments or improve their organization or time management. I have gained knowledge about many helpful resources through my coursework in this Master's degree program and in my field experiences that I could share with future Study Skills students. Overall, I am hopeful that our new Study Skills program on the SylvanSync app will give today's students the skills, the confidence, and the motivation to achieve to their highest potential.

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