

case study:

Designing a sensory room with Hazel Court Community Specialist School

Sensory Guru caught up with Katherine Lewis, a Specialist Communication Teaching Assistant from Hazel Court Community Special School.

Sensory Guru has worked alongside Katherine and staff at Hazel Court School to design their new Sensory Room, which has been named by learners as The Discovery Room, due to its ability to create an immersive environment where students can discover the wonders of the world around them.



Can you describe your experience of working with Sensory Guru?

It has been great. I feel incredibly lucky and that we have got a good thing going for the school.

It felt like a really natural, organic process and we are really happy with the results.

What did you want to achieve through the Sensory Room design?

We had a Sensory Room that was brand new when Hazel Court School was built 20 years ago. However, the needs of the cohort of young people that attend our school have changed since the original Sensory Room was built and we found that it wasn't fit for purpose any more.

For some of our learners who have grown up with technology, the Sensory Room equipment appeared archaic and was therefore, not always motivating.

Lots of the equipment was static and items such as the fibre optic lights and bubble

tubes often had to be replaced due to breakages or because they had worn out due to old age.

For learners who were full time wheelchair users, the original Sensory Room equipment was difficult to access and floor space was limited for hoisting. This meant usable space in the room also became an issue. In short, the Sensory Room was not really working for our learners anymore.

Rather than spending money on small fixes and updates, we felt that we should look at the feasibility of redeveloping the room so that it would suit the needs of our entire diverse cohort of learners.

We felt that we needed a room of requirement - a space that could be interchangeable and flexible, whilst being user friendly and very simple to use.

Some of our young people have extremely complex sensory needs which can result in sensory overload.



It may be the case that they struggle to cope with filtering any visual or auditory clutter. In terms of a Sensory Room, this means that they needed to have a space where the visual stimulation is set at their level — and a quiet, calming space for supporting self-regulation.



We felt like Sensory Guru products would provide us with this level of scalability.

We also wanted to have a room that would lend itself to being an immersive environment so that we could use the projected technology to enrich our teaching of the curriculum. For example, we could use the projection to create an immersive experience of The Blitz and therefore enhance their learning of World War II.

We wanted to create immersive environments that allowed the learner to feel that they were in woodland, or a cornfield, or the seaside – places that we all take for granted but may be incredibly difficult to access and experience in real life for some of our young people.

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The new Sensory Room had to meet the needs of everyone.

It was also important to ensure that certain elements would not be broken easily.

The room that Sensory Guru designed completely fitted the bill for what we thought we needed.

How have the different needs of people been catered for through the Sensory Room?

The room is a big clear space now, so access is no longer an issue.

When you enter the Sensory Room it is just a blank room — until you turn the different elements on. This means that you can make the space into something different every time you use the space.

You can also personalise it to the learner's needs. If you know someone has a huge aversion to light you can cater for that, or if you need to have all the elements on to capture a student's attention, you can personalise the room to meet their needs.

There really is something for everyone.

The room is such a versatile space that it has also lent itself to other opportunities that you wouldn't immediately think of doing with a Sensory Room.

For example, we have one young man who enjoys being a leader and he has been able to run peer led yoga sessions in the Discovery Room. He chose the music and background images and we put mats down so that he could lead a nice calming yoga session.



Yet at other times he has been in there doing the funk jam on the Optibeam and making music. That lovely space has made that happen. It would not be the same in a busy hall or classroom.

It really does provide a fantastic, ever changing experience.

Hazel Court strives to improve independence, inclusion, equal opportunities, communication, team work and education. How has the Sensory Room helped to meet these objectives?

Hazel Court School sets individual learning outcomes for all learners to ensure continuous challenge, progress and personal growth. We also set individual learning outcomes for personal targets when using the Discovery room.

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Engagement, participation, cooperation, sharing and teamwork are key behaviour for learning skills that our learners are showing constantly when using the Discovery Room.

For example, our learners practise their co-operation and turn taking skills to decide what apps they want to play with on the Magic Carpet, Magic Mirror and on the Optibeam.

There are also lots of opportunities for the staff to take a back seat and for the learners to be the leaders, organisers, decision makers and to develop their social skills.

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Our young people also learn a lot about social communication and development.



At the end of each session we spend time discussing their likes and dislikes.

Many young people with a learning disability often do not have a reliable yes or no response. Some may say 'yes' and that they liked something, because they may think that this is what you want to hear.

They may not have had many opportunities to give their opinions or make choices. The number and range of amazing apps available in our Discovery Room give our





learners plenty of opportunity to make choices and talk about what they like and don't like.

So, I would say that every single person has benefited from it.

Are there any success stories that stand out?



We had a new year 7 learner who had trialled using Eye Gaze but could not successfully establish screen engagement.

This young man is very sensory and he is especially interested in experiencing things that he can physically feel and see in close proximity to his face. So, looking at activity on screen did not give him the feedback he was seeking and enjoys.

However, since he has been spending time in our Discovery Room he has begun to show interest and interact with the different elements in the Sensory Room, such as the Magic Carpet and Optibeam. As a result of this, his screen engagement outside of the Discovery Room has improved, and his world is expanding beyond that close proximity boundary.

The Physiotherapists and Occupational Therapists at Hazel Court School have commented that he has progressed significantly with his physical development recently.

He has become an explorer in our Discovery Room, which is great.

We might have never seen that if we didn't have the Magic Carpet, or the Optibeam, or it could have been a longer process for him to make that progression.

“ He has become an explorer, which is great.”

For another of our learners who has severe physical difficulties, one of his targets is bilateral reaching, which he is able to work on and achieve in front of the Magic Mirror.

We also have one learner, a young man who has autism, complex needs and challenging behaviour, who did not enjoy using the old sensory room.

“ Skills learned in the Discovery Room are the step to generalising the skills in other places.”

He was also reluctant to engage with our new Discovery Room. However, he found an app he likes on Magic Carpet (the paint splatter app) which he has started to interact well with. There are very few new things in general that he would interact with, so it is great that he has been able to do this! What we often find, and always hope for, is that skills learned

in the Discovery Room are the step to generalising the skills in other places.

Although this can be a slow process, if the learners can interact with something in the Discovery Room they might start to interact with another activity somewhere else.



Some of our learners can be quite closed down to new experiences - new things can be scary! They don't know if they are going to like them and they don't know what will happen! Our Discovery room is a safe place to try something new at their own pace as it can be personalised to accommodate and overcome any worries.

The Discovery Room has also been successful in that it has got so many staff using it to facilitate exciting and creative sessions with our learners.

There are lots of staff using it that may have described themselves as "technophobes" but they have been surprised at how easy they have found it to use.

How has the Sensory Room changed the way you work?

We have found lots of creative ways to do things.

For example, with a class of learners with very profound and multiple learning disabilities we created an immersive experience that created the effect of us being in the Sahara Desert.



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We had the scene projected on the surrounding walls, while the Magic Carpet gave the effect of a camp fire and a scent pot created the smell of burning wood.

For some of our learners who have physical difficulties that mean that they find it easiest to look upwards, we have held cloths above their heads so that the Magic Carpet projects onto the material. This enables the learner to see and interact with the projection taking place above them.

So if I could give advice to anyone, I would say be imaginative.



Look beyond the immediate application of the app and link it to other things. Make the immersion work for you.

Don't just go in and play a maths quiz, make it about taking turns, saying 'yes' or 'no', make it about so many other things.

It is about how creative you can be.

For example, on Remembrance Day we projected a corn field onto the walls, while birdsong sounds were played on the Optibeam and the Poppies app was running on the Magic Carpet. Some of our learners spent the minute's silence in this environment and it was amazing.



This wonderful space has provided opportunities for just going in and reading stories with soft lighting and an aura of calm.

Is the Discovery Room value for money?

Yes, it has been well worth it.

You could spend £10,000 on a traditional, static Sensory Room, but we have spent the money on something that is like hundreds of Sensory Rooms all in one. Its versatility means it can be as many rooms as we want.

Our Learners called it the Discovery Room, but I think of it as The Room of Requirement. For those people that have read Harry Potter that is a good analogy. You can open the door and it can be anything!

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The technology also means that you can access software updates, which can be cheaper in the long-term.

I would never recommend to buying static software again that never changes or updates.

Just the other day we logged onto the Magic Carpet App Store and found there was a new app! The updates are really exciting.



Other companies that we looked at seemed to be cobbling old products together to make something new, but this is new stuff. There was nothing like this out there.

What advice would you give to people trying to raise funds for a Sensory Room?

Schools need to be creative in this tough financial climate.



Because our school has always been used by community groups outside of school hours, it has enabled us to apply to charities that are willing to donate funds to spend on the good of the community.

If we had applied for funding just for our school we wouldn't have ticked the right boxes.

However, because we have opened our school up to other community groups, it has enabled us to have access to extra money and charities that are willing to donate funds.

Community groups now use the Discovery Room after school, during the week, on Saturdays and throughout the school holidays.

Sensory Guru also let us come to their showroom to try out different products with a small group of our learners before we finalised what elements we wanted to include in the Sensory Room.

Tony Lowry, the lead app designer at Sensory Guru, hosted a brilliant time and we took loads of photos of our learners interacting with the amazing technology, which we included in our fundraising bid.

The photos showed how the technology would enhance learning, personal growth and self-regulation, as well as how we could set learning outcomes and monitor the progress of the learners that use the technology in our school.



We would like to thank Hazel Court for working with us and letting us carry out this interview.

We would also like to give a special thanks to Katherine for her imagination and enthusiasm (and for bringing homemade cookies into the office) — we wish you had been our teacher at school!

Some of the elements that make up Hazel Court's Discovery Room include: **Magic Carpet, Magic Mirror, Optibeam**