



LEARNING: Teacher Robyn Christie with Waratah Public School's technology class. Above, students shooting a video.

Pictures: Anita Jones

Screen legends

A special technology class empowers students to be independent and self-directed learners, writes **Helen Gregory**.

WHEN teacher Robyn Christie tells her class to finish their Popplet, upload it on Edmodo, her students don't even blink. For the 29 pupils of Waratah Public School's technology class, the words are part of their everyday vernacular in the same way their parents would have spoken about page margins, rulers, textas and pencil sharpeners.

Fingers tap impatiently on keyboards as the seconds that remain to complete the task tick down to zero.

"Hands off computers!" Christie instructs the class.

A former training manager at AMP, Christie became a teacher 11 years ago and spent eight years as technology co-ordinator in Sydney primary schools.

When Christie joined Waratah in mid 2010, the principal at the time asked her how the

school could retain the gifted year 5 and 6 students who were leaving at the end of year 4 to enrol in opportunity classes at other schools.

"We talked about having an extension and enrichment class for those kids, to provide them with the opportunity to problem-solve and think creatively and all the things that go with that," she said.

The year 5 and 6 students chosen for the class would move through the curriculum faster than their peers in the two other year 5 and 6 composite classes.

But this would be an opportunity class with a twist – it would also operate as a technology class, with each student seated in front of a desktop computer and encouraged to use the internet, e-books, cameras and iPads in almost every facet of their learning.

Daily use of the tools would, as school principal Maria Williams said, "scratch where the kids are itchy" and mirror their



use of technology at home. It would aim to increase students' aptitude for technology but also engage them on a deeper level, to hone a love of learning. "Every single student in the class has a

computer at home so for these kids it's a natural extension of their learning because they pick things up fairly easily," said Christie, who is also the assistant principal of years 5 and 6, runs staff development sessions and is responsible for repairing the school's arsenal of computers.

"If we can get them hooked on learning now then hopefully it won't matter what tools they use, they will still enjoy learning no matter what."

Students sat a literacy, numeracy and general ability test and were asked to create a Powerpoint presentation.

The class was formed for the start of 2011 and operated from the computer lab for the first term, where students learnt about cyber safety, summarising and paraphrasing, and completed 15 minutes of typing practice every day to bring them up to a speed of about 30 words a minute.

The school invested in 30 computers, and a

dedicated classroom was established for the start of term 2.

Christie used to set aside up to an hour each day to build computer skills.

But after the year 6s have "upskilled" their year 5 classmates, Christie has now focused her attention on increasing her students' technological skills through the completion of literacy and numeracy tasks.

"So for instance at the moment we're learning to write for the screen, so we're making their own movie, an advertisement, a news program or a music video."

When *H2 Review* visited, the students were working in pairs to learn about the effect of smoking on health.

They watched a DVD of anti-smoking commercials and created a Popplet, similar to a mindmap, with nuggets of information they gleaned from the advertisements.

Students uploaded their Popplet as a graphic to website Glogster to create a Glog.

A Glog is a page akin to an interactive poster that includes the Popplet, boxes of text, graphs, images and music.

When the students finished their work Christie turned on the interactive whiteboard and brought up a grid of each student's computer screen, which could be seen flickering as students put the finishing touches on their Glog.

Christie clicked on one of the screens and pressed "broadcast" to show it on the whiteboard and on everyone's computers.

She used a control button to scroll down on the Glog and edit the work.

When she reviewed each pair's work, she instructed the class to upload their work to Edmodo, a social networking site similar to Facebook.

While they may have been at the computer on Wednesday, the rest of the week may involve work on the class's website and blog, using video cameras to film scenes for the pieces they have written and directed, or recording themselves using iPod Touches reading *Bridge to Terabithia* aloud to measure fluency.

There is also opportunity to participate in external competitions, and when the school didn't have enough copies of *Animal Farm*

and go through everything step by step, now it's more troubleshooting."

Students are empowered to be independent and self-directed learners, moving through set tasks at their own pace or picking subjects for projects.

Year 6 student Laura Giles said she was shy when she first came to the class.

"The work is very extended and can be tricky sometimes," she said.

"We've learnt a lot of courage and braveness – if Mrs Christie gives us a tough project to have braveness and get

and go through everything step by step, now it's more troubleshooting."

Christie regularly brings in her iPad and aims to next focus on podcasts and vodcasts. Christie is aware not every high school will have the same resources as Waratah, so her students still complete pen- and paper-based tasks.

Her students still go to the library to borrow books. The increase in the number of tools available for learning has changed the roles of the teacher and student.

Christie still teaches through the "chalk and talk" method for numeracy and literacy tasks, which requires more contact time to cater for students of varying ability.

"The rest of the time I give them what they need to do or I tell them what they need to do and we talk about it and they jump in and do it," she said.

"Whereas when I started originally we'd go through it and I'd show them this and that

in with both hands and enthusiasm." The classroom is structured to facilitate teamwork, with year 5 and 6 students working together as buddies.

Christie has also implemented a rule that students must ask two of their classmates for help before approaching the teacher.

For some parts of the day Christie acts more like a facilitator, walking around the classroom to oversee progress.

Christie can use SMARTSync software to monitor each student's computer screen.

Students stay focused through time limits on tasks and a list of work for students to move onto if they finish before their peers.

Principal Maria Williams said students in every grade at the school learnt about cyber safety and visited the computer room at least once a week. (Christie's class has an Indonesian lesson instead.)

Every classroom has at least two computers, an interactive whiteboard and the ability to engage in video conference.

It is hoped iPads will be implemented into the curriculum in the near future.

"We see the whole thing growing and progressing – this is not the end of it, this is just the beginning of it," Williams said.

"The only certainty we have is what we're doing now is going to have to be upgraded and reinvented in three years.

"We as a school have to continue to change and be responsive to the needs of the technological age and the children.

"I can't even imagine where it's going to go – it's exciting, though, and I love it."