

Investing for Maximum Return

by Nancy Knowlton

The reality for most schools and school jurisdictions is that they must outfit classrooms with interactive whiteboards and other technology over time. The way in which this can be done takes many forms, but which way will give the greatest benefit. Is one way more right than another? Having observed the deployment of SMART Board interactive whiteboards and other technologies in classrooms around the world for fourteen years, I can share these thoughts.



Maximum Value

Likely everyone would agree that the greatest value to be had from any technology is in the results that it produces. When children are actively engaged in their lessons and activities, true learning can occur. For technology to have an effect, it must be effectively used. So the question really is about how teachers can most effectively use interactive whiteboards that they have to improve teaching and learning.

Available for All Schools

One approach says that all schools in a district should have the opportunity to get started with interactive whiteboards. Often this means that one classroom will be outfitted in each school. This classroom could be a single teacher's classroom (for example, a first grade classroom), or it could be a computer lab that is shared among many teachers in the school.

In the single-user model professional development for that teacher needs to be in place prior to receiving the products in the classroom, and optimally, there would be ongoing access to support throughout the year. Like all good educational experiments, having the teacher share her experiences with other teachers is one way of expanding the learning experiences for all. Others may be invited to observe a class. Additionally, the teacher may maintain a diary of strategies that she has tried and activities that received a particularly strong, positive reaction from the students.

Where teachers would share a computer lab or school library, there are a couple of ways of making this a success:

- Teachers should have some professional development at the outset so that they feel comfortable in

integrating the technology into the curriculum. As they discover and integrate particularly useful functions into their everyday lessons, they'll become keen to learn and use more.

- The teacher-librarian or technology specialist may deliver specialist courses to students or be available to lead and guide the subject or classroom teachers.

Clusters

A very different strategy would mean that the technology would be aggregated and placed in clusters within schools. Every second school may have two classrooms outfitted or every fourth school may have four classrooms.

The chief benefits of this approach are the sharing among the teachers and the concentration of technology support. If two grade one teachers both have access to the technology they can support each other through the sharing of what has worked and what hasn't worked as well as their favorite resources that they either create or access online.

Selecting Candidates

One of the biggest challenges that administrators have is how to select those to first receive interactive whiteboards in the classrooms. The model that appears to work best is an application process whereby teachers express their plans and intent around the deployment of the interactive whiteboards. It is a more objective basis that brings out the best in the teachers who want to learn new things and bring new opportunities to their students.

Which Way?

The teachers who appear to make the greatest progress in the shortest amount of time are those where technology has been clustered. The sharing and support seem to be the most critical factors in the successful integration. The teachers openly express that feeling of support and say that they feel that they were able to adapt their style more quickly to a technology-enabled environment.

Where it is not possible to cluster the technology in a phased roll-out scheme, other methods can work. Taking the time to think through professional development, resources and support will make all the difference.



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