

Sharing Is Good

by Nancy Knowlton

There's a quiet change afoot today. Tens of thousands of teachers in countries all around the world are spending their spares, evenings, weekends and school breaks creating materials for use in their classes to engage their students and energize learning. Teachers have been creating various forms of classroom materials for years. What differentiates this work from prior activities is the mode of creation and storage – namely, on a computer.

For some, this creation process is a labor of love. The simple act of creating meaningful ways to bring out a concept is fulfilling and worth the effort, and the fact that the materials can be reused means that the time invested will have an ongoing return. For others, the time spent is just something that has to be done.



In school after school, work is duplicated as many of the same resources are being created. Much of the work could be eliminated or reduced through the simple sharing of resources. Here are some considerations for individual teachers and school jurisdictions thinking about effective sharing of resources.

Learn from design guides

One of the biggest concerns that a teacher has is that her materials don't look professional enough to share. Many teachers aren't confident in their color combinations, font selections, images or layouts.

A small amount of help from templates and design guides can be a great boost to a teacher's confidence. A simple thing like using the same color combinations for a subject can be a great first step.

Decide who owns the material

The issue of ownership of created materials is a murky one today. On the one hand, teachers are paid to do a job and that job arguably includes the development of resources for classroom or other use. On the other hand, many teachers go above and beyond the basics, creating materials that are intended for a broader audience, and see the materials they create as their own property.

Whatever an education system's position on ownership, it needs to be clear and up front. Expectations around the

creation of sharable materials need to be clearly communicated.

Use copyright-cleared images

Teachers are also concerned about the copyright issue surrounding the images that they have used in their materials. They often believe that it is fine for them to use the images if the materials will only be seen in their classroom, but they feel uncomfortable putting the lesson activity into a more public domain without being 100% confident that the images are clear to use.

Often a teacher will forget where she sourced an image, so confirming the right to freely use it is difficult. Teachers must ensure that images are copyright-cleared in the early stages of developing resources, to save time and ensure legitimate use. Subscribing to an education content provider can guarantee access to copyright-clear images and multimedia content.

Keep it flexible

As good as prepared materials are, there are always some small elements to customize to a teacher's preference. Perhaps an image could be swapped for one that is more relevant in a particular area. Perhaps the materials can be customized to fit a project theme.

Whatever the mode of creation, retaining the flexibility for additional users to customize certain aspects of materials can mean that teachers get exactly what they want when they use others' materials.

Develop sharing strategies

Teachers can certainly start by sharing their materials on an *ad hoc* basis with their friends and colleagues. However, ambitious, coordinated sharing strategies are more likely to generate greater returns. The role that the education jurisdiction has in sharing is important. Providing a portal with materials sorted by grade and subject as well as correlated to standards not only shows commitment, but it can save time and energy for teachers.

Recognizing teachers who produced the materials is also important – it's great professional recognition.

Boost teacher productivity

Nobody has enough time today to do everything that he wants to do or needs to do. Starting with someone else's materials can give a teacher a leg up in the prep time that is needed to move to a digital learning environment.

Nancy Knowlton is the co-founder and CEO of SMART Technologies, the world's leading supplier of interactive whiteboards. Nancy's husband and SMART co-founder, David Martin, is the inventor of the interactive whiteboard category. Together they have built a company that is focused on delivering easy-to-use, yet feature-rich collaboration tools, including the SMART Board interactive whiteboard. Nancy can be reached at CEO@smarttech.com.