

Considerations When Choosing Classroom ICT

by Nancy Knowlton

With a dizzying array of choices now available for classroom information and communications technology (ICT) products, just how does a technology head sift through the options to make an informed choice that works not just today but into the future? What factors really make a difference to student outcomes?

The first place to start is with a clear set of must-have requirements created with input from a variety of interested parties – tech staff, teachers, support staff, trainers and coaches, administrators, parents and students. This clarity around absolute requirements can help the sifting that will naturally take place as a range of options is considered, and keep decision-makers focused on the same key requirements.



Interactive Whiteboard at the Core

For many people the interactive whiteboard is the core tool in the classroom for whole-class teaching and learning. While it isn't used one hundred percent of the time, it is most often the base ICT platform from which other items are built out.

Cost

While it is likely not the most important factor, cost is nonetheless an important consideration. Cost includes the actual cost of the product, installation, enhanced warranty and replacement costs for consumables (e.g. batteries or special tools).

Teacher Learning Curve

There is no product that is more expensive than one that is hard to use or that takes a long time to learn how to use. Take a detailed look at what is required to invoke a function and compare that across products under consideration.

Integration with Other Products

Sooner or later, products need to interact with other hardware and software products that exist today or that will be introduced in the future. Understanding the open nature of the platform is integral to evaluating how usable the product will be in the future.

If the products are already integrated, then look for the ease with which the various products interact. Question where the real value is in the integration. Tight integration is noticeable, and the value can be clearly articulated.

Support and Warranty

If there is a question or a problem, the support from the manufacturer is critical to getting back in operation. Is phone-in-only support available, or are there training and materials that can be pushed out to the school or district to allow a level of self-service?

Looking closely at the warranty just makes sense. Is the warranty a true bumper-to-bumper warranty, or is there fine print that limits the warranty in some way?

Resources and Community

Teachers need more than just hardware and software in their classrooms – they need resources to assist them in getting started and in the development of their own materials. They also need a community with which to share their thoughts, ideas, materials and challenges.

Ask what the manufacturer provides and what they enable to support the products in use. Is their community a true voluntary one, or are members enrolled automatically upon purchase of the product?

Category Leaders

It is no secret that category leaders are the ones typically driving innovation and who have the available resources to invest. They are leaders for a good reason – customer after customer has chosen the leader's products after rigorous evaluation processes. Category leaders have larger resource and materials bases and bigger teacher communities – the better to support and engage old and new customers.

Our Vision and Future Roadmap

The interactive whiteboard has become a core classroom product driving adoption across schools, districts, states and countries for the last few years. Teachers who were reluctant to even try to use a computer in their everyday teaching are now not so reluctant as they see and experience the benefits interactive whiteboards bring.

What is available today is only part of the equation. Learning where things are going tomorrow speaks about more than just new features and products. It's about how a company is going to support the learning process for more than just the life of the product.

If you look deeply at what we have to offer, you will see that we measure up on these factors and more. Our products may not be the cheapest in terms of out-of-pocket purchase price, but their in-use total cost of ownership is superb.

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 product 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.