

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 rather than all at once. How they do this can take numerous forms, but for many, the question is which form offers the greatest benefit. Is one way better than another?



Maximum Value

Likely everyone would agree that the greatest value to be had from any technology is in the results. When children are actively engaged in their lessons and activities, true learning can occur. To ensure you achieve maximum value, you need to know which integration model works best for your district, school, teachers and students.

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 (single user) or computer lab (multiple users) will be outfitted in each school.

In the single-user model, the teacher receives professional development prior to getting the product and then ongoing access to technical support. Having this teacher share her experiences with other teachers is a good way to multiply learning experiences for all. Others may be invited to observe one of her classes, for example, or she may keep a diary of proven strategies and activities that received strong, positive responses from students, all in an effort to invite participation and prepare others for additional installations over time.

Teachers who share an interactive whiteboard in a computer lab or school library need a different approach. They need professional development at the outset, too, but they also benefit from having regular opportunities to share what they learn with colleagues who also use the product. Someone may even be appointed to organize a weekly exchange.

In a library, the teacher-librarian may deliver courses on how to conduct research or guide classroom teachers on integrating information from a variety of sources, including interactive whiteboards. Or a technology specialist may lead sessions on how to use the technology.

Clusters

A very different strategy involves aggregating the technology and placing it in clusters within schools. So every second school may outfit two classrooms or every fourth school may outfit four.

The chief benefits of this approach are enhanced sharing among teachers and concentrated technology support. If two first grade teachers have access to the technology, they support each other by sharing their favorite resources and activities as well as what has worked and what hasn't.

Selecting Candidates

According to many administrators, one of the biggest challenges is how to select who receives the first interactive whiteboards. An application process seems to work best. Through it, teachers outline their plans for integrating interactive whiteboards into their teaching and the curriculum. Not only does the application provide an objective measure of who may best use the technology, but the process itself brings out the best in teachers who want to learn and offer new opportunities to their students.

Which Way?

In my experience, regardless of where in the world our products are deployed, the schools that appear to make the greatest progress in the shortest amount of time are those with technology clusters. Why? Sharing and support seem to be most critical to success, and these are achieved to a much higher degree with the cluster model. Teachers openly acknowledge and appreciate that feeling of support and say it makes them more capable of quickly adapting their style to a technology-enabled environment.

Where it is not possible to cluster the technology in a phased roll-out scheme, other methods can work, including the single-user model. You may also try scheduling a regular conference so all your schools and teachers can share what they've learned, or you may develop a user blog or an easily accessed online support site. Whatever model you finally choose, taking the time to think through professional development and the availability of resources and support will ensure you receive maximum value from your investment.

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