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Tactical Advice //

Interactive Whiteboard Deployment Tips and Tricks

Incorporating interactive whiteboards into the curriculum is easier if you follow these educators'
examples.

Karen D. Schwartz

posted December 27, 2011

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Richard O'Malley already had interactive whiteboards on his mind when he took over as superintendent of New Jersey's Edison Township Public Schools in February 2011. He had championed the technology in his previous position in nearby Monmouth County, and he understood their power to enliven learning.

"My goal was to transform both teaching and learning" in Edison Township classrooms, O'Malley says. "I knew from experience that interactive whiteboards could help do that."

He wasted no time making that goal a reality. While reworking the district's technology budget for the 2011–2012 school year, O'Malley set aside funds to buy more than 400 *Promethean ActivBoard 378 Pro* units with DLP projectors for 11 of its 17 schools. By the end of the summer, all preschool and first- through fifth-grade classrooms had whiteboards, and all teachers had received some training on how to use them.

It's been only a few months, but to O'Malley's delight, the teachers already are incorporating the devices into their lessons in increasingly creative ways. Some have used the whiteboards to transform board games into interactive learning experiences, while others have incorporated *Promethean's ActivSlate* wireless tablet, which allows them to move around the classroom and interact with students during a lesson.

Positive Reinforcement

The benefits of interactive whiteboards are well understood. Robert J. Marzano spent two years studying the effects of interactive classroom technologies on student achievement, reporting in fall 2010 that their academic performance increased by an average of 16 percentile points when teachers presented their lessons using Promethean's ActivClassroom suite of interactive learning tools and resources. Although these gains can't be attributed solely to the use of an interactive whiteboard (which is only one component of the integrated ActivClassroom), it's clear the tool enhances the learning process.

But the technology's effect on teachers can be equally powerful, says Lou DeVlieger, superintendent of schools for the Upper Darby School District in Pennsylvania. In 2007, district officials began integrating *PolyVision* interactive whiteboards into select classrooms. By the end of 2011, 239 units had been deployed across the district's 13 schools. Upper Darby High School is using *PolyVision TS Series whiteboards*; elementary school classrooms, meanwhile, have eno one units.

As is the case in Edison Township, Upper Darby students and teachers are showing their enthusiasm by using the boards creatively. First-graders, for example, get to play interactive games on the board as a reward for finishing a task. And one high school geometry teacher uses sketch-pad software on his board to show students how the movement of angles and shapes changes the equation.

Perfect Practice

No two whiteboards are exactly alike, so it's important to understand the differences before committing to a make and model. Educators in the thick of their own deployments suggest these best practices for making the most of the technology.

Choose the right features for your students. Survey teachers to determine what they will be doing with the boards and to identify the physical and learning characteristics of the students who will be interacting with them. These factors can influence your choice of screen size and mount.

To facilitate the give-and-take learning environment he envisioned, Edison Township's O'Malley selected Promethean's 78-inch *ActivBoard* and *ActivArena* interactive intelligent pens, which enable two users to write on the board simultaneously.

It's equally important to choose a solution that evolves with your needs. If you might eventually add student response systems, go with a provider that can deliver that functionality. Spend strategically. A districtwide interactive whiteboard deployment is a significant investment, but there are ways to mitigate the costs.

Budget limitations were a key concern for Roland Rios when he decided to bring the technology into Fort Sam Houston Independent School District classrooms three years ago. Rios, director of instructional technology for the three-school district in San Antonio, ultimately chose MimioTeach, a system from DYMO/Mimio that uses a removable magnetic bar to transform ordinary whiteboards into interactive ones.

Rios especially liked that the MimioTeach bar can be shared among several teachers. "Most interactive whiteboards are permanent and very expensive," he explains. "If they are damaged, they become even more expensive to maintain."

Prioritize professional development. Although interactive whiteboards can do many things, they can't reach their potential unless teachers know how to use them.

In Upper Darby, teachers receive formal and informal training from other educators who are already adept at using the technology. "There's an art to using the device effectively, and the best way to learn is from others who

have become good at it," says Martha Menz, the district's director of curriculum and professional development.

Think outside the box. Although interactive whiteboards are billed as interactive teaching tools, it's the students who reap the biggest benefits. Because most students are already comfortable adapting to new technology, it makes sense to leverage those talents, says Steve Figurelli, staff development trainer for Edison Township Public Schools.

"Eventually, we see the ActivBoard as a student-centered device," Figurelli explains. "A teacher could be at a table working with a small group, while another group uses the interactive whiteboard as a learning center." In this scenario, he continues, "the whiteboard becomes a hub of resources: A student could come up to the board to open a file that reminds him how to solve a certain type of equation, for example, or kids could use it to develop creative, interactive presentations."

Support is critical. Technical support is always important, but with interactive whiteboards, application support and practical advice are especially valuable. Upper Darby officials believe the whiteboards have succeeded in their district because teachers who have experience creating lesson plans that use whiteboards routinely mentor other teachers.

Many providers also host online communities where teachers can share content and best practices.

The Brains Behind the Operation

An interactive whiteboard's hardware platform certainly is important, but its effectiveness in the classroom ultimately depends on the integrity of two core components.

"The software and content engage students and allow them to create or manipulate content themselves, so they are critical parts of the interactive whiteboard package," says Peter Grunwald, founder and president of the market research and consulting firm Grunwald Associates. He advises district officials who are evaluating several interactive whiteboard systems to base their decisions on the strength of each system's software, as that's what differentiates each product from its competitors.

The educators who use whiteboards day in and day out confirm that software functionality is key. Teachers in Pennsylvania's Upper Darby School District, for example, rely heavily on PolyVision's lesson development software, which allows them to personalize lessons, add videos and drawings, and access a content library. In nearby New Jersey, teachers at Edison Township Public Schools use Promethean's ActivInspire software to develop interactive lessons that encourage collaboration and creativity. And in San Antonio, Fort Sam Houston Independent School District teachers use DYMO/Mimio's MimioStudio software to incorporate audio, video and animation into their lessons.

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