



“At the school level, having a critical mass of boards in the building is key. You’re developing a cohort of people using the board who are sharing and collaborating.”

“Having peers in your grade level or subject area and being able to share lessons and techniques becomes essential – it’s ongoing all the time.”

## Professional advice on how to make the most of your SMART Board interactive whiteboard

By Jane Chamberlin Grove

### Where’s my classroom? Who’s my teacher? How do I find my locker?

**Students returning to school** surge through the doors and leave behind the breezy days of summer. Freshly sharpened pencils and the clack of new binders quickly replace water parks and bicycle bells. But for teachers, beginning a new year is a complex process. By the time the first buzzer sounds, most teachers have already spent weeks preparing for that whirlwind day – setting up the classroom, refining lesson plans and getting technology products up and running.

Whether you’re just starting with a new product or using existing ones, you’re probably looking for resources that are effective but easy to work with. You want to make the best use of your digital tools without getting overwhelmed. Teachers and ICT specialists who have been around the back-to-school block a few times know there are several ways to ensure products are used extensively, from fall till spring. From technical assistance to lesson activity tools, and from practice time to peer support, teachers benefit from a myriad of resources when it comes to technology implementation.

John Blaser, technology integration specialist at Eastchester High School in New York, has been introducing teachers to SMART Board interactive whiteboards for six years, overseeing the product’s installation in 90 percent of the school’s instructional spaces. After dozens of training programs and many hours of mentoring, Blaser has developed the philosophy that simplicity, collaboration and professional development are the keys to developing technology skills.

If you have never used a SMART Board interactive whiteboard, Blaser suggests familiarizing yourself with Notebook software. “By looking at the software and starting with what’s in the Gallery, like backgrounds and graphics, you can put together some simple activities that align with your curriculum topics.”

Next, Blaser encourages you to use your interactive whiteboard in everyday activities. In the initial learning stage, consistently performing basic activities on the interactive whiteboard develops a comfort level that grows throughout the year. “Use it for the morning meeting in elementary school,” Blaser says. “Or the ‘Do-Now’ list, if you’re at the secondary level. That way, you use it every day and build confidence with the technology.”

When you’ve mastered your daily activity, you can move on, but Blaser recommends keeping activities simple. For example, you can try using the interactive whiteboard with smaller groups of students. With minimal instruction, today’s tech-savvy students can quickly start completing tasks on the interactive whiteboard. At the same time, these accessible activities help you get in the habit of using the product on a regular basis. “It doesn’t always have to be a big-bang, full-class kind of lesson,” says Blaser. At the elementary level, for example, learning centers are perfect for these kinds of lessons, which might consist of a basic Notebook software lesson or a website activity.

Selecting websites for a lesson, Blaser points out, should be done with care. They should align with curriculum topics and allow for students to get up and touch the screen. To perform an effective online search, Blaser suggests typing in words like “interactive,” “animation” or “Flash,” so that results will contain activities that provide lots of opportunity for students to manipulate content.

An excellent resource for finding interactive websites and other forms of curriculum-aligned content, says Blaser, is SMART’s education website. It lists sites that let students do everything from investigating a black hole to designing a roller coaster. “I advise teachers to start on the SMART website with the online resources,” says Blaser. “This is partly to get them to familiarize themselves with what’s on the site, and I take every opportunity I can to send them there.” Linking to the resources on SMART’s website cuts down on time spent sifting through the Internet for tried-and-tested content. Students receive a fun, hands-on learning experience that is easy for the teacher to set up.

To give teachers further support in creating multimedia lessons, Blaser refers them to SMART’s collection of online lesson activities. Created by educators or SMART’s own team of curriculum experts, these activities are interactive and dynamic, and are correlated to local curriculum standards. “You go onto the SMART site and find an activity that ties into one of your curriculum topics,” explains Blaser. “Then you either use it as is or with some modifications. If you can’t find one that fits your topic, you look at the lesson in terms of design techniques and use it to create your own simple lesson with those techniques. The SMART-created ones are the ones we can deconstruct and figure out how to do activities on a more sophisticated level.”

Aside from keeping activities simple, Blaser puts a definite emphasis on collaboration. He explains that when you have the ability to share ideas and learn from other teachers, you are much more likely to use technology to its fullest potential. An in-school network of peers, for example, lets you share lesson plans and best practices with those who teach right beside you each day. At Eastchester High School, teachers often sit in on their colleagues’ classes to observe strategies and techniques.

An alternative, or addition, to in-school peer groups is an online community of teachers who use the SMART Board interactive whiteboard. Digital forums give you access to a huge group of like-minded peers who can offer the wisdom of experience that helps novice technology users solve problems, discover resources and find inspiration. Particularly helpful for teachers without in-school networks, online discussion forums such as SMART’s bulletin board can provide support in numerous areas.

Astute use of resources, collaboration and consistency all propel teachers toward effective use of their interactive whiteboard. But Blaser says that what makes these strategies truly work on a day-to-day basis is professional development. Giving teachers the time to familiarize themselves with Notebook software, develop lesson activities and share ideas with peers is crucial to ensuring that the interactive whiteboard remains a worthwhile investment.

At Eastchester High School, administrators realize that professional development is essential to ensuring that technology investments pay off. Their commitment to helping teachers become proficient with the SMART Board interactive whiteboard is reflected in the hours dedicated to training. “In our professional development sessions, teachers get a block of two hours or more, and teachers will meet several times a month over the course of several months,” explains Blaser. “Our teachers have about 20 hours for PD during school hours to collaborate on developing curriculum.”

As teachers work together and continue their professional development, they are better able to create increasingly complex lesson plans. “They begin to build extra dimensions into the lesson. Teachers might start with Notebook lessons that they have developed, and then they can add links to websites or media – a video clip, or an attachment of a homework sheet – and then they’re building multidimensional lessons that become much more sophisticated.” When teachers become adept at using the interactive whiteboard and Notebook software, they can create lessons that explain concepts in depth and with a variety of multimedia tools.

If teachers and schools can apply the principles of simplicity, collaboration and professional development, they will reap extraordinary benefits from their SMART Board interactive whiteboards. Given the time to gain confidence with the interactive whiteboard, teachers can use the product to create student-centered lessons and make technology a natural part of each class. For the students who have recently given up swimming pools and tennis courts, lessons they can touch and see make the back-to-school transition easy. In your classroom, they will still be active as they learn.



“The whole idea of collaboration around the SMART Board is really important in terms of comfort and confidence with teachers using the board and providing opportunities to share best practices and learn from each other.”

“I’ve been in education since 1978 and most of the time I’ve been in the classroom, and I’ve never seen a piece of technology that really makes it possible and really facilitates the integration of technology on a daily basis. The SMART Board really does that. You can put computers in the room, but you’re only getting a few in there. This involves all the kids.”