

THE WHITE STUFF

A DECADE AGO, 'AN INTERACTIVE WHITEBOARD IN EVERY CLASSROOM' WAS SEEN AS THE FUTURE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOLS – CAROLINE WRIGHT EXPLORES HOW THE LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED SINCE THEN...

It was at the Bett Show 2004 that Charles Clarke, then secretary of state for education, announced that schools were to receive £25m extra funding to spend on new technology – with a vision that this would help 'meet the personal needs of every learner.'

Six months later, he committed further funding and pledged that 'every school of the future will have an interactive whiteboard (IWB) in every classroom'. And certainly today, market analyst Futuresource confirms that the penetration of Interactive Displays (IWB, Interactive Flat Panel and Interactive projectors) in the UK at the end of 2012 was 87 per cent.

Since 2005, BESA has carried out our annual ICT in UK Schools research looking at the adoption of technologies in the classroom, including IWBs.

In 2012, 73 per cent of secondary schools stated that they were well-resourced with IWBs. However, this year the figure has dropped slightly to 70 per cent. And the outlook for 2015 suggests a similar view; it is anticipated that 30 per cent of secondary schools will be under-resourced with the technology.

Bearing in mind the level of IWB saturation, this figure therefore suggests that ten years on from the initial Government investment, schools are looking to upgrade, renew or replace their IWBs.

However, should schools simply replace? What are the considerations that should be made when carrying out this review?

Certainly the success of interactive whiteboards has been mixed. A lack of Government focus on training meant that in the early adopter phase many teachers simply used the technology as an expensive display screen. Effective training should have been of a high quality, showing teachers how to embed the technology into the learning environment using the tools and content provided.

What many suppliers at the time offered, was simply operational training; how to plug the technology in and switch it on – resulting in a tragic waste of the technology's potential.

Other mistakes were made, such as mounting the board at a suitable height for the teacher without a consideration of the height of the children who should be interacting with the



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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displayed content. Positioning the board on a wall facing the window with no blinds in place is another example of factors that initially limited the success of the investment.

On the other hand, the majority of schools fulfilled Clarke's vision by using the technology to enhance learning, engage the students and now, not wanting to teach without one.

Are interactive whiteboards still the answer?

Today however, the potential for technology has changed hugely. When high-definition screens are becoming more common in the home and on personal computing and gaming equipment, a projector-generated image can be disappointing. Schools are now purchasing products that all have multi-touch and gesture capability. Whilst interactive whiteboards are still in demand, schools are diversifying their estate with interactive projectors and panels.

Interactive panels are popular because they have little to no glare, wherever the student is seated. The high-definition LED display provides brilliant visuals to capture the class' attention. Interactive panels have the additional advantage that schools need never replace another projector bulb thus lowering their total cost of ownership.

An increased use of video from YouTube and similar sources during lessons may well drive a need for a device which combines the high-definition screen, to optimise the use of video, with the 'touch' interactivity of the whiteboard.

Wise investment

As many educational establishments can verify, the physical price of a piece of technology is only part of its overall costs. Value for money is found not only in the price, but in the warranty, content, training, usability and functionality of the technology. If it is not well supported, doesn't integrate with your current classroom estate and cannot be shown to improve learning outcomes then it will have far greater costs down the line. To get the best value for money from technology, greater emphasis needs to be placed on making the best use of assets. Schools need to ensure that their teachers have a continuing professional development (CPD) plan so that they can become proficient users of the technology they have in their classroom.

In summary, ensuring high level training is included in the price (it's not a bad time to have refresher course to ensure all teachers are optimizing the potential of the technology) can result in a significantly higher return on investment.

Schools should never underestimate the power of bulk buying. Work with your local authority to collect orders from a number of schools and then go to the sellers with potential for a large sale. Communication with other schools could generate healthy competition between suppliers for larger orders which could reduce prices.

The new freedoms bestowed on schools means they can look into different ways of funding through leasing. With the work BESA is doing to lobby the Government to allow schools to take out finance leases, this can become a very cost effective way to afford the best technology and support services.