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Why I Hate Interactive Whiteboards

By Bill Ferriter

I'll admit that there aren't many topics I'm more passionate about than interactive whiteboards in the classroom.

Seen as the first step towards "21st century teaching and learning," schools and districts run out and spend *thousands* of dollars on these gizmos, hanging them on walls and showing them off like proud hens that just laid the golden instructional egg.

See Also

Read the related story, ["Whiteboards' Impact on Teaching Seen as Uneven."](#)

I gave mine away last summer. After about a year's worth of experimenting, I determined that *it was basically useless*.

Sure, my students thought it was nifty, but it didn't make teaching my required curriculum any easier. I probably crafted two or three neat lessons with it, but there was nothing unique about those activities. I could have easily put together similar lessons using the computer stations I already have in my room and any number of free online tools.

A couple of weeks ago, when I learned of a Twitter Ed Chat about interactive whiteboards, I hurried right over. Even after an appliance meltdown, a minor flood, and a two-hour trip to the laundromat, there was no way I was going to let a conversation about whiteboards slip away.

Thankfully, there was a lot of wisdom in the Ed Chat room. Few people spent any meaningful time praising the instructional goodness of IWBs, and the majority of participants recognized that without time and training, they quickly become nothing more than really expensive overhead projectors.

I'd go even farther, though. I'm willing to argue that even *with* time and training, interactive whiteboards are an under-informed and irresponsible purchase. They do little more than reinforce a teacher-centric model of learning. Heck, even whiteboard companies market them as a bridging technology, designed to replicate traditional instructional practices (make presentations, give notes, deliver lectures) in an attempt to move digital teacher-dinosaurs into the light. I ask you: Do we really want to spend thousands of dollars on a tool that makes stand-and-deliver instruction easier?

My biggest IWB beef, though, is that they are poorly aligned with the vision of instruction that most people claim to believe in. Ask a principal what the best classrooms look like and she's likely to say something like this:

"In the best classrooms, students are involved in creating knowledge together. They're studying topics, designing experiments, collaborating with peers, and challenging one another's preconceived notions. While the teacher is always present to guide and to facilitate, the students are empowered to discover and to grow independently."

Sounds great, doesn't it? If we could turn control of learning over to students, we'd probably see motivation *and* academic growth levels rise all at once. Classrooms would become innovative places that students were drawn to instead of the snooze palaces that they seem to be for so many kids today.

But if those are the outcomes we most desire, then why are we wasting money on interactive whiteboards—tools that do little to promote independent discovery and collaborative work? Sure, you could argue that when used as an instructional center, whiteboards become more interactive, but that is one really expensive center, don't you think?

I'm also peeved because schools rarely have any kind of system in place to evaluate the impact that whiteboards are having on instruction. We spend heaping piles of cash collecting whiz-bang gadgets and then completely fail to reflect on whether or not they have helped us achieve the outcomes we most desire. Isn't that called hoarding?

Frankly, it seems like most school leaders don't really care whether IWBs change instruction in meaningful ways in their school's classrooms. Why? Because whiteboards aren't an instructional tool in their eyes. They're a PR tool—a tangible representation of innovation that can be shown off to supervisors and parents alike. Heaven forbid that you run a school without whiteboards if your colleagues down the street have taken a big bite of this 21st century fruit. You'll look like a hayseed at the next PTA meeting, won't you?

I think Sylvia Martinez, who writes at Generation Yes, said it best: “You can't buy change. It's a process, not a purchase. The right shopping list won't change education.”

Most of the time, interactive whiteboard programs are, in fact, nothing more than vain attempts to buy change. Rarely paired with a clear vision of the classrooms we'd like to see, a set of tangible objectives that can be measured, or any systematic attempts to evaluate outcomes, these high-priced contraptions are sad examples of the careless decision-making and waste that are crippling some of our schools and systems.

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