

Bye-Bye Blackboards

Interactive and expensive, whiteboards come to the classroom

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

It's easy to ridicule "interactive whiteboards" and the schools that are rushing to buy them. Choose your analogy: it's like rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*, perfecting VHS in a Blu-ray world, or lemmings jumping over a cliff. For while individualized, self-directed online learning is all the rage, here's a technology that still takes whole-class instruction for a given, puts the teacher front and center, and offers not much more than a modern update to the age-old chalkboard.

These contraptions, which go by brand names like SMART Boards and Promethean ActivBoards and cost about \$5,000 a pop, are giant computerized screens that crackle with video, audio, and Internet connectivity. When hooked up to a computer, they enable teachers to present multimedia lessons meant to catch the eyes (and brains) of a generation addicted to Wii, iPhones, and IMing. They also serve as an old-fashioned blackboard (teachers and students write on them with special markers) but with a twist: whatever is scribbled on the board can be captured, digitized, and saved for later. This is particularly helpful for students who miss class and can in effect replay the lesson at their leisure. It also allows teachers to "rewind" and explain a point made 15 minutes or 15 days earlier.

But for the technorati and the pedagogical constructivists, this isn't nearly transformative enough. (Or, in Clay Christensen's words, "disruptive" enough.) As 6th-grade teacher (and edu-tech expert) Bill Ferriter recently asked in *Teacher Magazine*, "Do we really want to spend thousands of dollars on a tool that makes stand-and-deliver instruction easier? ... Why are we wasting money on interactive whiteboards—tools that do little to promote independent discovery and collaborative work?"

If there's common ground between "individualized learning" gurus and whiteboard fans, it might come in the form of

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"learner response systems." These clickers allow all students in the class to answer a teacher's question at once. Their responses can be instantly aggregated and displayed on the whiteboard; teachers can look at their computer screens and know right away which of their students gave the wrong answer. It's "formative assessment" taken to the extreme, and allows a teacher to know which students need more explanation, and when the class is ready to move on. A non-experimental study conducted by Robert Marzano and funded by Promethean found positive results for 79 teachers who used the clickers in conjunction with the boards.

And it's not hard to understand why these things are spreading like kudzu. Karen Lockard is the principal of Bethesda-Chevy Chase (BCC) high school in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.; Promethean boards are now installed in two-thirds of her school's classrooms. She

told me this fall, "I had a parent call me the week after school started and she said, 'My son can't learn in this classroom this year because his teacher had a Promethean board last year and now she doesn't. And now my kid can't learn.' I didn't ask her, what did he do the year before that when [the whiteboards] didn't exist?"

Of course, the golden age of the interactive whiteboard might soon come to an end, as the recession, the crash in property taxes, and competition from the baby boomers' retirement expenses take their toll on school budgets. But these technologies still might be worth the investment, if they allow teachers to be just as effective with a class of 30 students as a class of 20. (If they can keep students more engaged, why not?) With that sort of efficiency, the whiteboards will pay for themselves. Will the teachers unions go for that sort of deal? Or will they view it as too "disruptive"? ❖