

Unleashing the Power of Students

by Nancy Knowlton

A number of years ago, I was visiting a state Teacher of the Year (ToY), and as luck would have it, the package of products that SMART provides to recognize these wonderful teachers arrived literally at the same time as I did. It was the end of the day, so I offered to set up the system and help get him started. He declined my offer politely, saying that I didn't need to go to all of the effort just for him.



Well, his students, not caring about the lateness of the hour, chimed in all at once, asking him to please let me help set up the new equipment so they could see what it was all about. He relented and there was a beehive of activity in the room for the next fifteen minutes or so as we assembled the floor stand, mounted and connected the SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard and projector to the computer, and loaded the software.

Getting Started

I took just a few minutes with the teacher, showing him the basic functions of the board and Notebook software. Then the deluge began. *Could you do this? How about that? What happens when...?* The questions came not from the ToY, but from his students. Very quickly, they were up at the interactive whiteboard, not only asking their questions, but also trying things out for themselves. The ToY and I moved off to the side, fascinated by the interaction between his students and the dealer who was with me.

Overcoming Uncertainty and Insecurity

The ToY quietly admitted to me that he didn't know very much about computers and that he hadn't really explored the Internet at all. He went further – when he learned that he would receive a package of technology products in recognition of being named the state ToY, he felt overwhelmed and insecure. Now, seeing his students' interest and fascination with the tools in their hands, he said that he had a new strategy – they would teach him how to use the products, and in the process, they would all enjoy their new learning environment.

Recognizing Strengths

The ToY is undoubtedly a subject-matter expert, but he also recognized that his students have their own areas of expertise. Furthermore, he had the confidence and strength to acknowledge his need for assistance with the

products and to create a learning environment that would allow his students to shine by helping him. (The creativity and good judgment he demonstrated when confronting his own need to learn were undoubtedly part of the reason he was chosen state ToY.)

Learning from the Experience

The interaction in the classroom that day had a profound effect on me and how I have thought about our products and their use in the classroom. As someone who went to school when teachers were the focus of attention, I was struck by the inherent value in showing students that we all have something to learn, regardless of age and experience. School is not something that ends with graduation. Learning is a lifelong pursuit. In this case, the ToY acknowledged that and found a rich opportunity for hands-on learning that may otherwise have gone unexplored. I have spoken about this experience many times since and urged teachers and administrators to remember all the people in the classroom who might need some assistance with the use of our products.

Making it Formal

We now offer a live, online training program for students in schools and districts using our products who want to learn more about their use so they can help and support their teachers. Children learn from observation and experience, but they also learn from structured sessions. This online program provides enough guidance and ideas to help students become technology assistants and enthusiasts in their own classrooms.

Guide on the Side

Finding a meaningful way for students to participate in class today is about far more than offering up opportunities for them to answer questions. It's about making them responsible for their own learning and for taking part in others' learning, including their teacher's. These kinds of subtle messages that are delivered every day about roles and responsibilities can only be a good thing.

Students helping teachers helping students – now that's a powerful dynamic.

Nancy Knowlton is the co-founder and CEO of SMART Technologies Inc., the world's leading supplier of interactive whiteboards. Nancy's husband and SMART co-founder, David Martin, is the inventor of the interactive whiteboard category. Together they have built a company that is focused on delivering easy-to-use, yet feature-rich collaboration tools, including the SMART Board interactive whiteboard. Nancy can be reached at NancyK@smarttech.com.