

Guide on the Side

by Nancy Knowlton

In the early 1800s, a profound breakthrough occurred in teaching – the blackboard supplanted the slate as the tool of choice in the classroom. The shift was momentous because previously there existed no means of presenting visual information to an entire class. Teachers had to go from slate to slate copying down the same information.



With the introduction of the blackboard, teachers were able to stand at the front of the room, face their students and lead them through all manner of subjects and material. And so began the concept of whole-class teaching and learning.

Sage on the Stage

Many great teachers have stood at the front of their elementary and secondary classrooms and ignited the will to learn in their students. They have lectured, explained, questioned, challenged, prodded and developed generations of citizens and leaders. Students have written their notes, listened attentively, undertaken their assignments and moved on to become productive members of society. This model worked well for a long time.

While we may have a romantic belief that education remains the same today as when we attended school, the reality is that children have changed, and much of that change has to do with the pervasiveness of information and technology. What was once a useful teaching model in a less digital, less hectic world seems dated to children who have grown up with technology all around them and who cannot understand why they should leave it behind when they enter a classroom.

Today's Students

Today's learners are described as open and accepting, multi-taskers, curious, willing to experiment, fiercely independent, capable of thinking and investigating, self-reliant, assertive discovery learners, extensive users of technology and prepared to learn any where, any time.⁽¹⁾

While a part of the class may involve the teacher demonstrating, explaining or lecturing, important segments of classroom time must take into account the changing nature of students and their expectations.

Many young children today will proudly announce, "I can do it myself," whether they are tying their shoes or learning to ride a bicycle. That attitude and confidence can be seen in the classroom. As much as possible, they want to be in control of their learning.

Engaging Interactive Whiteboard Strategies

Making the transition to a guide-on-the-side model of teaching, while challenging for some, can be liberating for both teachers and children. Here are some ideas for implementing the approach:

- Have pupils take charge of getting the interactive whiteboard, projector and computer up and running each morning and shutting them down each evening. It will save teachers time and involve the children.
- Include some pupils in training on the interactive whiteboard software so they may support the teacher.
- Let students navigate websites or explore answers to problems from the interactive whiteboard. Like driving a car, they'll remember more when they are in control.
- Backseat driving is allowed. When other students are engaged enough to help, they are switched on to learning.
- Incorporate as many opportunities as possible for students to show what they know through classroom presentations.

Teachers still need to impart their special subject-matter knowledge and ask the right questions at the right time. But by taking a step back and allowing students to take more responsibility for their learning, teachers may also find a shorter route to improved outcomes.

The interactive whiteboard helps create a digital learning experience that resonates with the tech savvy children of the 21st century. It is undoubtedly fun, but more importantly, when used with the guide-on-the-side model of teaching, today's students are engaged and ready to learn.

⁽¹⁾ *Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds*, Final Report, Alberta's Commission on Learning, October 2003. Online at <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/commission/printable.asp>.

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