

## The Battle of the Boards

If, like many ETp readers, you have little access to an interactive whiteboard, or if, like most teachers worldwide, you have never seen one, you might envy the lucky few who have these devices installed in every classroom. Please don't.

My objection to these things is not that they occasionally break down (They may, but will less often as the technology improves), or that some teachers find the technology daunting (They might at first, but really it is not that difficult to master), or that they are so expensive. Of course, they are horribly expensive but perhaps this, perversely, is one of the attractions. I know of a language school which, having lost a lucrative teacher training contract because – they were told – it had no interactive whiteboards – seriously considered investing in one for a display classroom, purely to impress agents and potential clients with this ostentatious display of wealth.

No, the objection in this article is that the traditional board (black or white) which the IWB is supposed to supersede is – in ways that really matter – better.

Before suggesting how, here is a grumble about the name (since if any professionals ought to question the names given to products by those that would sell them to us, it is surely those involved in language): Interactive White Board. 'Interactive' has a nice buzz about it, but ought not what gives us a buzz be *interacting students*, not teachers interacting with bits of technology. And 'White' is strangely modest; the screens on these things can be any colour you like. Here is a better name, to distinguish it from the traditional MUB (Multi-User Board): SUB (Single-User Board) – or DUB (Dual-User Board) for the latest versions – to reflect how limited it is in how many people can write or draw on it at the same time.

Often we worry about TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and try to cut down to make more space for students to speak; should we not address TWT (Teacher Writing Time) as well, and make more opportunities for our students to write? The more we hand over the boardwork to students simultaneously writing, the more practice they get. When issuing timetables and books at the beginning of a course, perhaps we should issue chalk or board markers to our students, too? Enthusiasts for the new boards are apparently excited that they can invite a student to the front and hand over the pen (Sharma 2010), but, at a traditional board, depending on its size, you can have *any* number of learners working at once.

According to advocates for the new technology you can bring democracy to the classroom by allowing all the students at once to pick options on electronic voting devices, and have their responses displayed in colourful, computer-generated graphs. The democratic ideal is thus reduced to occasional permission to choose from a restricted range of options. Admittedly it might be argued that political democracy amounts to little more than this in practice (a point made by the graffiti which sometimes appears during national elections, consisting of a short row of crosses and the tag:

'Here is your lifetime's supply of democracy'), but surely in our lessons we can aspire to a deeper notion of democracy than this.

Far from being deeply democratic or participatory, the pedagogic model for the computerised board is of a (no doubt benevolent) dictatorship, or a priesthood, with its miracles – flashes, spotlights and zooms – to entrance the flock, perhaps with a selected student to hold the sacramental pen and assist at the ceremony, all slickly and seamlessly presented. There is a serious point here for teachers who want learners to engage critically with how ideas are delivered, and to take ownership of the learning process. The slicker and more seamless we make these things, the less accessible their inner workings become to scrutiny, the less confident our students may feel about subjecting them to critique, and the more we circumscribe their questions and engagement.

Of course unthinking technophobia is no more desirable than uncritical techno-enthusiasm. We should not, for example, simply scorn the opportunity to display relevant, interesting texts or websites. But we should be aware of how teaching tools incline us to teach. Whole class 'heads up' concentration on what is on the screen, for instance, helps teachers to see who is paying attention, and to control and synchronise everyone's reading of the material, but – compared with books, photocopies or computer monitors handled individually or in pairs – offers less encouragement to students to engage and respond in their own time and in their own way. And does the use of exciting multimodal displays really do much more than desperately drag the learners' attention toward the screen, when what we ought to be doing is to encourage (or allow) them to pay attention to each other? And not just each other: with its internet links and webcams, the screen may be a window onto the 'real world' 'out there' but surely we have the real world *right here*. If a student's eyes are wandering toward the window or a friend's doodles or the clock on the wall, let's make a resource of the world outside the window, the doodles, and what's on the walls.

This is another reason to rename this device a SUB. It is a SUBstitute for the world (and that includes our students) immediately at hand. Perhaps it also substitutes superficial sensory stimulation for depth of thought and individual reflection (An illuminated screen does not make for illuminated learners). It SUBverts a valuable lesson from communicative language teaching, of the benefits of *learning by doing*; instead it encourages reverting to *teaching by showing*. It leads technologically forward and methodologically backward.

And what about the traditional board? At its best it is everyone's, not just the teacher's. It is a communal notice board, a graffiti wall, a canvas for collaborative artwork, a background for a collage, a part of the classroom carnival, an introduction to take the limelight or to share an insight, a huge slab of scrap paper for drafting thoughts and work in progress (not an intimidating piece of perfection that it seems blasphemous to defile with anything but a finished product), a refuge for the amateur, an asylum from sterile slickness, a space for learners to present themselves and to approach others in designs and doodles, writing and drawing, announcements and murals, messages and mess. A computerised board *can* be these things, with a bit of thought and a bit of time and a bit of knowhow (Tom Walton's

blog is well worth looking at for ideas: <http://blogs.ihes.com/tech-elt/>), but the traditional board demands little more than willingness to let it happen. You don't even have to turn it on!

Admittedly I am not keen on either chalk dust or board marker fumes (but then the rumble of a computerised board digesting its electricity supply can be pretty irritating, too), and it is true that SUBs have some handy features, if you want a big stopwatch, for example, or to find your place quickly in a coursebook listening exercise. But if we want to maximise students' individual engagement, and interaction with each other, they are very little help at all. Meanwhile they can pose a menace: the pressure, once they have been installed, to make use of them, more to justify the financial investment (or perhaps to impress an observer sitting at the back of the room with a tickbox for 'use of technology') than for the actual good of the learners.

No doubt there are teachers who make excellent, impressive use of the SUB, just as there are teachers whose use of the MUB is limited or lousy. But, however impressive the benefits appear to be of having our boards digitally enhanced, we must always beware of being digitally bedazzled.

Sharma, P. *The rise and rise of the interactive whiteboard*. English Teaching Professional. Issue 66. January 2010

Walton, Tom <http://blogs.ihes.com/tech-elt/>

### **A dozen activities which the old board does better:**

#### **1 Collecting names**

Mark off a column on either side of the board, and get a student to write the names of half their classmates in one column, and another student to write the rest of the names in the other. Good for practising basic questions ('What's your name?', 'How do you spell it?'), letters, and working out instructions ('E, not I!' 'L before A, not after A' ...), as well as for learning names. Works best with minimal teacher involvement.

#### **2 Student-student dictation**

Get some students to write two or three sentences each (all different) on the board, dictated simultaneously by classmates. If they have just done an exercise, involving ten sentences (for example), divide the board into three, and get three students to write up sentences 1-3, 4-6 and 7-9. Whoever finishes their batch first can do number 10. Good for listening, speaking and spelling practice, and useful for getting answers on the board to check homework or classwork.

#### **3 Deductions from pictures**

In threes or fours, give students each a word, to read in secret and to draw a picture of, in a strict ten-second time limit. When everyone has drawn and signed a picture, put the students in pairs and get them to discuss what they think the pictures represent, using adverbs or modal verbs ('Maybe Ali's

picture is a house', 'No, it must be a car – it's got wheels', 'Could it be a bus?' ..).

#### 4 Listening race

Write words or phrases on the board and give different coloured markers to several students, who race to circle the words as they hear them (in a song, or in a recorded conversation for example). Whoever circles the most is the winner.

#### 5 Writing race

Divide the class into two or three teams, each lined up facing the board. Give markers to the students at the head of their lines (closest to the board). Tell everyone they're to write words of a particular kind (body parts, personality adjectives, past simple verbs ...). On your signal, they run to the board, write a word, pass the marker to the person behind and dash to the back of their line. Then the next person runs to the board, writes a word, passes the marker back, and so on, until you signal the end of the race. Whichever team has the most different words wins.

#### 6 Work for early finishers

While the class are working on an exercise, write up several similar questions on the board. The first three or four students to complete the exercise can come to the board and write their answers. These can be checked by the rest of the class once everyone has finished the exercise.

#### 7 Reporting on classmates

Divide the board into a grid with every box named for a student. Hand out several board markers and get everyone to write up a sentence about a classmate, and then to pass on the markers to another student. When all the boxes on the board are full, everyone can sit, and you can all read and discuss and/or correct what has been written. (A good follow-on from a activities in which students have been telling each other about themselves.)

#### 8 Discussion write-up

After pairs or small groups of students have been discussing a topic or brainstorming vocabulary for a while, appoint two or three students to go round separately gathering ideas and to write them up on the board together, for everyone to then look at and check and consider as a class. E.g. they might collect arguments for, and against a position, or verbs, nouns and adjectives to use in writing a story, or words which feature specific phonemes ...

#### 9 Post-mingle write-up

Get the students up and mingling, asking and discussing questions (devised by them, you or the course book on whatever topic you're working on). Listen in and write up some things you overhear ('A few people think that cats are cruel', 'Karel could only marry a cat-lover', 'Dogs seem quite popular in this class' if the topic is pets, for example). Bring the mingle to a close, hand out several markers and get students to add more comments based on what they have discussed.

## 10 Drawing to revise vocabulary and spelling

Divide the class into two teams, each with one writer, who stands by the board and one artist who stands next to you. Whisper a word to the artists, who run to the board and elicit the word from their team mates only by drawing pictures (They may not speak or write). Team mates shout their suggestions to the writers, who each try to be first to write the word, correctly spelt, on the board.

## 11 Collaborative labelling

Brainstorm a large number of vocabulary items on the board (preferably written up by several students), then get the students to label the items with symbols or letters to indicate what they know or feel about them. E.g. the items could all be food, labelled 'sweet', 'crunchy', 'delicious' ...; nouns ('abstract', 'countable', 'formal' ...); animals ('dangerous', 'beautiful', 'four-legged' ...). The students check the labels together, and question and/or justify them. Useful for consolidating vocabulary, distinguishing between fact and opinion and degrees of certainty, and for discussion.

## 12 Up to the learners ...

If you have a mid-lesson break, or the students are around after the end, hand everyone some chalk or a board marker before you go. You never know what you might find on your return, but you may well find something on the board worth seeing, reading or knowing, or something to learn or teach from.