

Ten things to do with an interactive whiteboard

Pete Sharma

As the virtual dust settles in the latest battle about interactive whiteboards (IWBs), - “to use or not to use?”- played out on on-line forums by passionate supporters and equally passionate detractors, Pete Sharma looks at ten things to do with....an IWB.

1 Don't buy one

Many language school directors and other decision-makers conclude that the purchase of an interactive whiteboard is too expensive. The reasons given for not buying an IWB are many and various. Some schools do not have the money; others add up the outlay of kitting out every classroom with a fixed board, built-in projector and all the peripherals (a slate, voting tool, text-to-board device) and close up the cheque book. Some people blame the recession; others are awaiting conclusive proof that the purchase of the IWB will lead to better learning outcomes. This first approach – not to buy an IWB in the first place - is an extremely common strategy, adopted by many managers.

There are a number of alternatives worth exploring for those choosing not to invest in an IWB. Many of the things which can be done using an IWB can be done using a computer and lap-top set-up, such as software demonstrations and projection of the internet. Moreover, there are portable (and less expensive) options, such as the Mimio and the e-beam.

2 Don't use it

IWBs have been described as ‘interactive white elephants’. One workshop described one use for the IWBs as.... a coat-hanger! I have worked in a number of institutions where the IWB can be glimpsed inactive at the front of the teaching room, studiously ignored by the teacher, colleagues and the Director of Studies, a purchase made under a previous regime. The teachers “missed the training session that came with the board”; the e-pen has been lost – as well as the manual which came with the board. This second strategy is remarkably common in a wide number of institutions.

3 Use it for presentations

You can run all the programmes installed on your computer through an IWB. Presentations of new language can be made memorable through harnessing the power of PowerPoint and multi-media. Such presentations are made, naturally, from the front of the class. Beware. The IWB can most certainly hasten a return to the teacher-centred classroom since it is “there”, dominating the room. In strategy three, the teacher simply replaces ‘chalk and talk’ with e-pen (or finger) and...talk.

4 Make your fourth wall transparent

You can run all the programmes installed on your computer through an IWB. Of all the ‘usual programmes’ (Word, PowerPoint, language learning CD-ROMs and DVD Roms, mind-map software, electronic dictionaries.....) perhaps the most dramatic is the ability to access the internet at any time. Teachers who use Web 2.0 tools in their classroom had to go to fair bit of trouble to set up a computer and data projector in the classroom. Post IWB installation, it is easier to do this at any time and has led to a rise in ‘just in time’ teaching: “OK – let’s Google it.’ So, while one of the most common initial effects of getting an IWB is probably to make the four walls of the classroom even more insular (see: strategy number three, above), in fact, the opposite may be true. One of the biggest pluses is simply to access the web, have students show their blogs, demonstrate the class wiki.....

5 Explore the software which comes with the board

Maps, diagrams, pictures, photographs, time-lines, video clips, lesson activities, activity templates, virtual die, games.... Whenever you get your IWB it comes with the most amazing range of software imaginable. For the teacher of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), the materials developed for the teaching of maths, geography, history and other curriculum subjects is phenomenal. A nice lesson to kick off a multi-lingual group is to have students each come out to the whiteboard and write their names and hometown on a map of the world, as part of a 'getting to know each other' session. "Hi, I'm Xi and I'm from Guangzhou". This could be then saved and printed out later as a handout for distribution to the class.

6 Load up the whiteboardable version of your course book

Do you use a course book? face2face (CUP)? Cutting Edge (Longman)? New English File (OUP)? New Inside Out (Macmillan)? If you do, you may well have noticed that the publishers are rolling out interactive, whiteboardable versions of these books to be used in class as a complement to the paper version.

Teachers can encourage what is known as 'heads-up' learning, with students following up an exercise working together and focused on the board, as opposed to being buried in their book (or on the wrong page). The audio transcript can be displayed and specific sections of the script can be played at will. In terms of giving feedback on exercises, you can instantly select to play the answers to only the question(s) the students got wrong. Teachers can use the zoom tool to crop any part of a picture or page and blow it up. There are a lot of exciting ways in which to use this new era of course book material.

7 Create, create, create

Not all teachers wish to create their own materials, but many do. Many teachers are already familiar with creating digital materials using programmes like Hot Potatoes. The IWB opens up new doors. Before unleashing those creative juices, it is useful to know how to do five basic things with the whiteboard software. These are:

Using the drawing tools, creating shapes such as squares, circles, and rectangles, speech bubbles, arrows etc.

Changing the colours of objects, text and the background

Locking objects in place, so that they cannot be dragged anywhere

Grouping objects so that they can be manipulated together

Using layers, by sending objects to the back, or bringing them forward

After this, imaginative materials can be made by changing the background colour to hide and reveal coloured text for instance. Teachers can easily insert audio clips and web-links into their pages, too.

8 Save and re-use material

Being able to save lessons on a memory stick or the server is having a radical effect on how we view lesson-planning. Imagine storing a term's worth or a years worth of lessons and being able to re-use this digital material for other classes or next year's course. As you run your PowerPoint, show web-pages or use digital course book material, you can annotate the screen and then save the annotations for a future class.

9 Review

Never has reviewing a lesson been easier – everything you have done on the board is there as a thumbnail – just scroll back to see any point in the lesson.

10 Develop new and exciting practices

We are just scraping the surface of the potential here. As global whiteboard penetration increases, as teachers dominate the new tools and functionality, exciting opportunities to change our pedagogies are arising. Here are three activities:

Toggle between the best that a publisher can provide and your own digital blank canvas (See: figure 2). The course book looks at U2 and the Stones. You then search for and import pictures, sound files and video clips of the pop groups your students love. So, the best of the global course book approach is combined with the best of teacher-produced material: local, personalised and relevant.

Start your business lesson with Google Earth on-screen. Ask the student where he or she works. Zoom in until you have brought up an aerial image of the very streets around their office. Use the screen as a basis for an activity on asking for and giving directions, tracing the route on the whiteboard, then using an e-pen to draw it onto the map.

Prepare a digital flipchart of sentences, some of which contain typical learner errors produced by your students. At the top the screen are two smiley face icons, one happy and one sad. Click on the 'infinite clone tool', allowing you to pull out an infinite number of smileys from each icon. Students drag the correct smiley to each sentence.

Most teachers when faced with the exciting opportunities of using an IWB rise to the challenge of Strategy 10. Most decision makers live far from the chalk-face. Those choosing the first three strategies, please ignore the rest of this article.

Bibliography

Barrett, B and Sharma, P 2007 Blended Learning: using technology inside and beyond the language classroom Macmillan

Martin, D 2009 Activities for Interactive Whiteboards (Helbling)

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Macmillan for their kind permission to use the screen grabs of New Inside Out Digital.

Bio

Pete Sharma is a Director of Pete Sharma Associates Ltd, which runs workshops and seminars in educational technology: www.psa.eu.com He is working as a Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, UK and is the current Editor of the CALL Review, the newsletter of the Learning Technologies SIG of IATEFL. With co-author Barney Barrett, he regularly blogs on technology: www.te4be.com

This is a draft of an article published in MET Vol 19 Number 1 January 2010