



EMPOWERING STUDENTS WITH CLASSROOM TECH

by Bill MacKenzie

It's no secret that technology is playing a bigger role in today's classrooms. As an IT liaison with the Upper Grand School District (UGDSB) in Guelph, I'm aware of concerns that classroom technology can be disruptive and distracting. However, I've found that the right digital tools not only allow students to learn anytime and anywhere, they also empower them to take ownership of their education.

Digital education platforms have evolved considerably and continue to improve. In 2012, UGDSB implemented Google Apps for Education, complemented by Chromebooks and tablets, which allowed students and teachers to access and share assignments instantly on any device and collaborate on working documents in real time. Our teachers instantly noticed that students felt comfortable and engaged in technology-rich classrooms.

The platform opened up new ways for students to process and absorb lessons. For instance, students who often struggled with writing skills quickly discovered text-to-speech tools on their tablets. This technology allowed them

to visualize and understand complex sentence construction. Soon they were putting together their own short stories.

Building on the momentum of our existing platform, the board was offered the opportunity to pilot Google's latest learning management app. In fall 2014, UGDSB was among the first in Canada to pilot Classroom, a tool that gave our faculty the ability to create and organize assignments, provide efficient feedback and communicate with their classes. On the flip side, our students were able to submit assignments online, connect with teachers during off-hours and access course materials in a single location.

Since teachers and students were already familiar with Google's suite of educational apps, the new system quickly became second nature. Students are now more organized and using less paper, while teachers spend less time marking assignments and can focus on what they do best: teaching.

What we didn't anticipate is how a digital education platform could empower our students. These kids are sharing content, research and ideas with

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their peers and in some cases, even reversing roles with their teachers. Students are learning together and becoming a source of information for the entire class. We're also seeing our classes take responsibility for their own work. Having access to class content on their personal devices allows students to keep up with their academic responsibilities and empowers them to read, process and make decisions on how to approach their next task.

With the ability to set up multiple virtual classrooms, students are getting a more tailored learning experience based on their individual needs. One of our math teachers set up two virtual classrooms to engage both the majority of his students and a select few that require more help. By assigning customized activities for each virtual class, the teacher is able to offer more focused small group instruction for those in need while others tackle equally engaging activities.

Even though technology is commonplace at home and at school, there are still barriers, financial or otherwise, that can prevent students from accessing digital education resources. When evaluating our learning technology needs, my chief concern was accessibility for students both inside and outside the classroom. A deciding factor in piloting Classroom was that our students could access their virtual classrooms using just about any tablet, smartphone, tablet or laptop. The system is easy-to-use and will work with any operating system on whatever device they have at home or in their pocket.

One of the most common concerns with educational technology is the risk of creating a distraction. With Classroom, the technology itself never became the focus. It was simply the structure within which everything happened. Students quickly became comfortable in their digital working environment. Instead of getting caught up in their new tools, they simply went on with their work. In many ways, even though the technology was present, it was actually invisible. Technology in the classroom shouldn't just be a bolt-on or an add-on, it should be the scaffolding.

Today, more than 1,200 teachers, half of our district, use Classroom. Seeing how a fully integrated digital education platform has empowered our pilot students, we're looking to apply these learnings in new directions. At UGDSB, students with special needs are included in regular classrooms thanks to support provided by Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs). This fall, we plan to train SERTs to use Google Classroom, which will offer them the unique opportunity to reach out to groups of students without disrupting class instruction.

Bill MacKenzie is an IT liaison at the Upper Grand School District (UGDSB) in Guelph, ON. UGDSB's 2,500 full-time teachers, along with hundreds of part-time teachers, are educational partners for 33,000 students in grades K-12.



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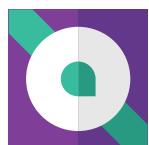
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