

Your Turn

by Margaret Ruggieri

From Chalkboard to SMART Board—and Back

Before I leave my office every morning to impart accounting knowledge to eager young minds, I go through my mental checklist to make sure I haven't forgotten anything: thumb drive with PowerPoint presentation, remote mouse, transparencies. I make sure I have hard copies of the presentation for student distribution, textbook, lecture notes, attendance sheet, and last but not least, chalk.

Chalk? Yes, chalk. This professor finds that, even with so many high-tech tricks in her bag (and these days that bag gets pretty darn heavy), some low-tech tricks are still relevant to effective teaching and successful learning—and sometimes, they're even necessary.

To set the record straight, I'm not opposed to advances in technology. Rather, I embrace them. I try to take advantage of any opportunity to learn a new software application or technique that has the potential to enhance student learning. For example, my remote mouse allows me to move around the classroom while lecturing, giving the class more "action." PowerPoint slides allow me to make more efficient use of class time and give lectures that are not only easier to follow, but also more interesting for students. In fact, during the first semester I used PowerPoint, I received unsolicited positive comments from more than 50 percent of my students. They liked that I provided them hard copies of the slides, which allowed them to take notes easily and pay closer attention, and that I posted an

electronic copy of the slides to Angel, our school's course management system, for later review.

The reality is that attempting to excite, motivate, and engage young minds in the world of accounting can be a daunting task. The fact that most of today's students have been raised on video games, MTV, and cell phones makes the job downright intimidating. Of course, our role as educators isn't to entertain, but I've found that the more exciting the



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classroom experience, the more focused the students are and the better they grasp complex material. Thus, using technology in the classroom keeps everyone awake and interested.

But as with most things in life, too much of a good thing runs the risk of becoming boring. Technology attracts the most attention when it's new. What happens when the technology itself becomes old hat? Or worse, an obstacle to learning?

Take the SMART Board, the electronic chalkboard (minus the white dust) that allows you to "save" all the material you've erased. This tool works well in the classroom and it's fun to use. But it has some limitations. First, it's often not large enough to display all the necessary material—say, all the steps to a complex accounting problem. Second, I'm a visual teacher, and I like to have my PowerPoint slides visible as I demonstrate a problem

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on the blackboard—not possible when switching between PowerPoint and the SMART Board. Third, I often don't need to save the material at all, since I like to start fresh with each class so the students can build the solution themselves. For this professor, the SMART Board isn't always quite smart enough!


Or consider the range of electronic review materials we now have available. An essential component to

most accounting courses is a review of homework problems to reinforce the covered material. Electronic solutions that publishers provide are an easy way to provide answer keys to students, especially with course management software such as Angel, WebCT, or Blackboard. But what works best in the actual classroom?

My experience has been that electronic solutions cannot be enlarged enough for classroom use—if any student beyond the front row wants to see them, he needs a pair of binoculars. I can zoom in, but then only a portion of the solution can be seen, which wreaks havoc on explaining more complex problems.

So I go back a technological generation. Solution transparencies work well, since enlarging the entire problem merely requires moving the cart with the overhead projector up the aisle. Such a low-tech solution benefits not only my front-row students, but also any sleeping beauty in the back of the class.

I don't disagree that technology has become an indispensable addition to the classroom. But what happens the day I walk into the high-tech classroom with thumb drive and remote mouse in hand, ready to deliver a chapter's worth of material, and the classroom computer isn't functioning or the keyboard battery is dead? Or the day my students are just in the mood for something different they haven't seen in a while?

These are the days I'm glad I packed my entire bag of tricks. I go back to first-generation teaching technology and pull out that old reliable piece of chalk. 

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