

# Content for Every Class

**EDCompass** newsletter

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## Quality Resources Make the Difference in Learning Outcomes

By **Alyson McAndrews**

An interactive whiteboard at the front of a classroom can be a canvass where learning is transformed – but without quality content, it's hard for teachers to take advantage of its benefits. Increased student engagement and improved learning outcomes can remain elusive goals if an interactive whiteboard is only used to write, save and e-mail notes.

Many websites boast interactive, copyright-cleared content that helps teachers use their interactive technology products in effective ways. But finding appropriate, curriculum-correlated lesson activities can be time consuming. Teachers who know where to find good content – and how to use it – find students are motivated, improving the classroom experience for all.

### Finding the right content for students with special needs

Since special education teacher Dave Balfour received his SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard two years ago, he has witnessed extraordinary moments in his classroom more days than not. He credits the introduction of this interactive whiteboard, and a variety of high-quality resources and software applications, as major contributing factors to improved learning outcomes for his students at **Chimo Elementary School** in Smith Falls, Ontario, Canada.

Balfour says that since he began using the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, he has seen nonverbal learners communicate understanding through dynamic, multimedia presentations, and students with behavioral problems move into regular classes successfully for part of the day. Balfour was so impressed by what he saw, he brought in a third-party tester to confirm the improvements. "After watching student after student demonstrate what seemed like a significant increase in learning, I wanted to have what I thought I saw confirmed. And it was," he says.

Throughout his two years teaching on an interactive whiteboard, Balfour has developed a long list of best practices for finding and creating great content.

"To teach the concepts my students need to learn, the first thing I do is take away some of the skill sets they would traditionally need to participate in the learning," he explains. For example, he might create content that removes the need for his students to demonstrate their comprehension by handwriting. He also searches for more visuals to add to exercises, so the emphasis isn't solely on the written word. "When we take out those elements, we find the students can express themselves in ways that work for them, and we discover the learning we are hoping for is in fact going on." Once this self-expression is made possible, a large amount of frustration disappears, allowing students to focus their energy on learning.

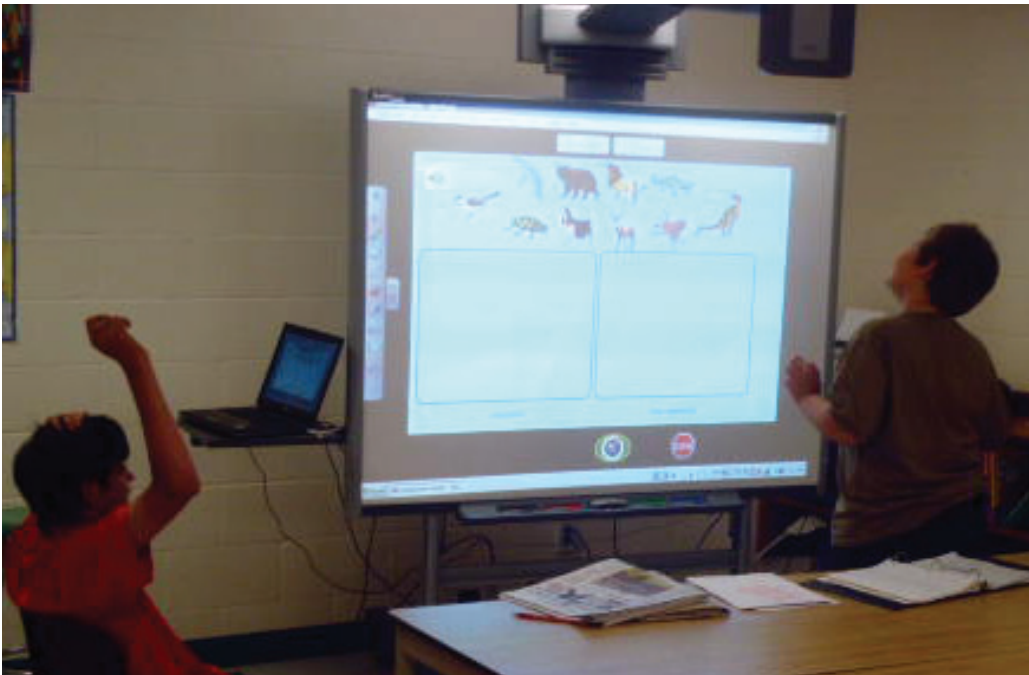
Balfour also looks for activities to help him make his lessons interactive. One place he visits often is the SMART Exchange™ online community. "The great thing about the SMART Exchange is that the content is dynamic and easily searchable. I am constantly going to the SMART Exchange to look for activities to use in lessons or find inspiration on how other educators are teaching the same concepts."



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**Dave Balfour**

Special Education Teacher  
Chimo Elementary School  
Smith Falls, Ontario, Canada



Balfour uses SMART Notebook™ collaborative learning software as his primary lesson delivery application, so he appreciates how tightly integrated the two are. “SMART Notebook is the best lesson-delivery application available because it is easy to use and works with all the other software applications I use. I often teach a concept through a video on YouTube and then move to an interactive game where the students can demonstrate their understanding of the concept on the board. I know right then if they understand what we are teaching.”

It is now possible for Balfour to give students with special needs the tools they require for success. “In my 23 years of teaching – and much of that with students with special needs – I have never had the success we have now,” says Balfour. “I believe it is because the technology allows our students to express themselves. They use the SMART Board interactive whiteboard and the content with pictures and animation to express themselves successfully. Until now, this had been the biggest roadblock my students had to learning.”

### Bring static content to life

Learning basic math or reading skills in Kevin Egan’s third-grade class at [B.W. Tinker Elementary School](#) in Waterbury, Connecticut, is so engaging that it’s hard to tell if the students think they are learning or playing. As an advocate of educational technology, Egan has mastered using his SMART Board interactive whiteboard to its full capacity, which means developing interactive and engaging content to teach with it.

“Basically, what I do is take the static, printed material from the curriculum and turn it into an interactive lesson,” he says. “I start by opening a SMART Notebook file and take a week’s worth of spelling, grammar, comprehension and writing lessons and turn it into a roughly 30-page Notebook lesson.”

Egan might, for example, use the sorter in the [Lesson Activity Toolkit](#) for a lesson on decoding vowel sounds. “Immediately the students are engaged. I also get instant feedback if they understand what we are doing. When a student comes to work out a math problem using the interactive hundreds board in the Toolkit, the result shows me if they get it.”

According to Egan, because the SMART Board interactive whiteboard hits all the learning modalities, all students are given the same opportunity to understand. “Of course there are big visuals on the board, and because of the touch function it is kinesthetic. As you talk through the exercise, you engage auditory learners and those who need a little bit of everything.” By using interactive technology that suits a variety of learning styles, teachers can feel confident that all students are receiving the same level of education.

Dave Balfour’s favorite places to find online content:

[SMART Exchange](#)

[YouTube](#)

[Special Education Technology – British Columbia](#)

[TumbleBooks](#)

[Teachers Love SMART Boards](#)

[Priory Woods School](#)



A variety of resources are required to make learning engaging. Egan began teaching on a SMART Board interactive whiteboard five years ago – he hasn't written on a regular whiteboard or chalkboard since – and like Balfour, he looks online for other resources to use in his classroom.

The SMART Exchange has become a favorite place to start. "I think the new search function works beautifully. You get what you are looking for almost right away, and because you can add, delete and change the lesson activities in SMART Notebook, you can adapt them to suit your classroom's needs."

Egan, who runs seminars throughout the United States on best practices for teaching with a SMART Board interactive whiteboard and SMART Notebook software, also finds the user communities on the SMART Exchange extremely helpful. "If you are ever struggling with a concept in your class or are looking for inspiration, you can go into the forums and talk to teachers who have solutions to these problems. I find most people who are participating are extremely helpful and happy to share."

The open dialogue on the SMART Exchange creates a support network for teachers to discuss issues that go beyond lesson delivery, Egan says. "It all contributes to what all teachers want to see – improved learning outcomes. When students are engaged, learning happens more quickly, easily and more often. I have seen an increase in standardized test scores since I started using SMART products." By taking full advantage of classroom technology, Egan has made teaching fun – and his students are responding enthusiastically with improved test results.

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#### **Kevin Egan**

Third-Grade Teacher  
B.W. Tinker Elementary School  
Waterbury, Connecticut

### **Motivating gifted students**

Diane Favata has her own unique challenges with her class of fourth- and fifth-grade gifted students at [Hunter's Green Elementary School](#) in Tampa, Florida, but like Balfour and Egan, she finds adding interactivity to her lessons increases motivation. Over her seven years of using interactive technology products in the classroom, Favata has discovered efficient and effective methods for keeping boredom at bay. She explains that because her students learn at an accelerated rate, keeping them interested is her biggest and most important challenge – and a higher level of interest means a higher level of performance.

Her students love the SMART Board interactive whiteboard because they know they'll find fun and interactive content there, all the time. "The biggest advantage I find in using a SMART Board interactive whiteboard is it works as a motivational tool and a focal point in my classroom," she explains.

Favata fills the interactive whiteboard with engaging and challenging content for her students, who are generally two to three grades ahead of their age. Because of the large variety of content available for the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, finding appropriate materials for her students is easy – and in gifted education, that's invaluable. "I can easily bring in content that teaches seventh-grade



science concepts and ensure they are age appropriate for fourth-grade students,” she says. With the SMART Board interactive whiteboard, Favata can feel confident her students will be engaged and their learning goals will be met.

Like Balfour and Egan, Favata finds herself spending a significant portion of her prep time on the SMART Exchange, searching for content that suits her students’ needs and then adapting it to fit exactly. “Because the resources are so interactive, they really increase motivation. It is also easy to turn them into activities for inquiry-based and small-group work, which is key for my students.”

Favata uses SMART Notebook software as her primary lesson delivery application for two reasons. The first is flexibility – it is easy to change elements of a lesson activity, by importing a video from YouTube or adding a link to a webquest. If needed, modifications can be made spontaneously while she is teaching, which allows lessons to follow their own path and gives students the opportunity to engage in inquiry-based learning as often as possible.

The second reason Favata chooses SMART Notebook is its ease-of-use. “For both me and my students, interacting with SMART Notebook is easy, and that takes the anxiety out of participating in front of the class for a lot of students.”

Favata always eagerly anticipates the next release of SMART Notebook because the software is constantly improving. “Teachers are always looking for ways to improve their lessons and engage students on a deeper level. A new release of SMART Notebook lets me do exactly that.” Although Favata teaches gifted students, her challenges are universal, and finding the right content makes teaching and learning more enjoyable for everyone.

### Answers for everyone

Regardless of what needs or learning styles students in specific classrooms have, great content ensures they are engaged and motivated, improving learning outcomes. As these teachers explain, the challenge lies largely in finding it. Websites like the SMART Exchange ensure that educators can always find high-quality and engaging resources that are correlated to curriculum standards. As the number of content and resources websites grows, and applications like SMART Notebook software evolve, students will continue to enjoy a more successful and fulfilling learning experience – because their teachers have found the right content. **EC**

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**Diane Favata**

Academically Gifted Program Teacher  
Hunter’s Green Elementary School  
Tampa, Florida

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