

West Exe Technology College

Maximising opportunities for learning



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Vicki Carah, Deputy Head, West Exe Technology College

Specialisation has been a major driving force behind the continued improvement at West Exe Technology College. A large, successful mixed comprehensive school in Exeter with nearly 1,300 students aged from 11 to 16, it has been a specialist Technology College since 1996 and gained two additional specialisms in Applied Learning and Leading Edge in April 2007. One of the biggest benefits of this triple focus has been the improvement in West Exe’s information and communication technology resources, and the college’s use of ICT was singled out for particular praise in their latest Ofsted inspection report: “ICT is used

well by both teachers and students in lessons to maximise opportunities for learning and maintain interest.”

The college’s use of interactive learning technology was given a further boost by a move to brand new, purpose-built facilities in 2006, equipped with SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards and SMART Notebook™ software in every classroom. “Making extensive use of ICT is central to our commitment to raising achievement for all students through developing innovative teaching and learning,” explains Deputy Head Vicki Carah, “and we have an ongoing ICT improvement plan to ensure that everyone’s using the technology well in interactive ways, and sharing best practice with others. At the same time we’re always looking out for opportunities to explore and experiment with new technologies, so we were delighted to participate in the SMART Response evaluation project.”

SMART Response (formerly known as Senteo) integrates seamlessly with SMART Boards and SMART Notebook software to make lessons truly interactive and inclusive. Via robust hand-held voting devices, students can respond at the touch of a button and give teachers instant feedback on how each individual in the class is doing. “West Exe were very enthusiastic about trying out the technology, so we provided three complimentary SMART Response 10-handset kits to undertake a pilot” says Shamoon Dean, Education Development Consultant at Steljes, the exclusive representative for SMART Technologies in the UK. “It was important to get a good cross-

section of opinions, so the evaluation was led by the college’s teacher coaches to ensure that SMART Response was used by a range of teachers with differing levels of ICT skills, and across different subject areas and year groups.”

Flexibility is one of the key features of SMART Response, and the college was soon using the technology in a number of imaginative ways. “We introduced the system during a whole staff forum with a ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’ style quiz. This proved a big success and helped demonstrate the features as well as generating real interest and enthusiasm, and we’ve also used it this year for the annual election of our Senior Prefect Team,” says Vicki Carah. “But it’s obviously in the classroom where SMART Response has had the biggest impact.”

During the pilot, SMART Response was used extensively across Maths, ICT, Humanities and Modern Foreign Languages, and the feedback from the teacher coaches has been overwhelmingly positive. All scored it highly on how easy it was to set-up and use, yet it was in the areas of student engagement and assessment that the product demonstrated its true power. “Students are very engaged with the SMART Response handsets,” says Business/ICT teacher Carol Dunford, “but I found the real value was in engaging less able and less motivated students in the lesson, and particularly when doing summative assessment and getting real data to evaluate their progress.”

“Initially the kids were buzzing with excitement, and some pupils still



teaching and learning within our school."

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come up to me and ask if we can do a test!" agrees Maths teacher Karen Motti. "SMART Response really helps when doing the KS3 mental arithmetic tests. At a quick glance of the bar chart of results I could see, for example, that most pupils got question 3 on fractions wrong, so I could focus my teaching and revision around this area of weakness."

"The class finds SMART Response exciting, a jazzy way to do their work, less challenging than writing answers down, less potentially embarrassing than answering aloud," adds Modern Foreign Languages teacher Alex Robertson. "It provides a really clear picture of achievement across a whole class, enabling students to get an overview of what they need to review as a group, as well as their own personal position on certain topics."

Towards the end of the SMART Response evaluation, a short anonymous survey was undertaken among a random selection of 130 students of all ages and both genders. "Despite the positive experiences of the classroom teachers using SMART Response, we were still somewhat surprised by the very high levels of approval students expressed," concludes Vicki Carah. "For us this was the last piece of compelling evidence needed and our Head teacher authorised the purchase of ten sets which have now found their way into departments and more and more colleagues are starting to make use of the exciting opportunity that SMART Response presents. We hope that like all the best applications of technology in our classrooms they soon become ubiquitous like our SMART Boards and projectors, helping to foster the best possible

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