

Connections that Count

EDCompass newsletter

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Unique course pairs budding and experienced teachers

By Heather Ellwood

When Brittany Glass and Amanda Germ graduate in 2011 from Florida Southern College, in Lakeland, Florida, as high school math and elementary teachers respectively, they will do so fully prepared to teach in a technology-enabled classroom. In a classroom with SMART products, more specifically. That's because they took the course, Instructional Technology, with Dr. Jennifer King.

King, an assistant professor in the department of education and the director of the Educational Technology Center at Florida Southern, has long had a keen interest in the ways pre-service teachers are trained to teach with educational technology. She leads courses about the practical use of educational technology products and how they are best integrated with instruction and learning. She's always been passionate about helping pre-service teachers build interactive lessons – regardless of their grade level or subject area. Designing effective postsecondary courses in this emergent area is no easy task, but one that King embraces.

In the fall of 2008, SMART donated some products to Florida Southern, which afforded King a unique opportunity to use these tools in her sophomore-level instructional technology course. The SMART products included three SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards, SMART Classroom Suite software, two AirLiner™ wireless slates, a SMART Document Camera, two class sets of SMART Response (formerly Senteo™ interactive response system) and Bridgit™ conferencing software.

King didn't just want to offer courses that gave her students basic familiarity with the technology, so she developed the SMART Integration Project, an initiative that would take pre-service teachers into real-world classrooms and fully prepare them to use SMART products in their lessons. Her goal with the project is to "prepare our pre-service teachers relative to technology integration. At the end of the project, I want them to be adopters of technology in the classroom."

As King hastens to add, undergraduates like Germ and Glass weren't just taking an educational technology course, "they were taking a course infused with SMART products." The first day of the class the students opened SMART Notebook software and started developing a lesson that used SMART products, and in each subsequent class they built upon that foundation.

"My job is to make sure my pre-service teachers have technology skills. I have to train them to be actual users of SMART products. They have to understand interactivity and its benefits and how to best integrate these principles into a lesson," explains King.

And that, says Glass, is one of the class's many strengths. She adds, "It's so helpful to become accomplished at using the software and the interactive whiteboard. Because of this class, I now know what I can actually accomplish as a teacher using SMART products."



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Florida Southern College
Lakeland, Florida



Tech buddies and pedagogy pals

The class and the project itself were divided into two parts. The first gave the pre-service teachers three weeks of hands-on instruction and practice time with SMART products. That's when King put out a call for Polk County teachers interested in partnering up with her instructional technology students to acquire the skills necessary to fully integrate SMART products into their instruction.

The fit, King explains, was natural, as Polk County adopted SMART products some years ago, and nearly 90 percent of Florida Southern's education graduates find employment in Polk County schools. All the participating Polk County teachers received some professional development on integrating SMART products into their classrooms, but for reasons as varied as the teachers themselves, they weren't fully incorporating the technology into their instruction. In short, they needed help.

During the second part of the project, King's students, armed with expertise and energy, went off to meet their partner teachers in various schools throughout Lakeland, ready to share their SMART skills and their lesson ideas.

During their first meeting, the tech buddies from Florida Southern conducted an inventory assessment of the technology in the classroom. They also did a quick survey with the participating teachers, their pedagogy pals, to gauge their comfort with SMART products and, more importantly, to find out the extent to which they were integrating them into their lessons. But it was during the four subsequent meetings that the real exchanges took place. The tech buddies walked the teachers through the use of SMART products, while the pedagogy pals mentored the pre-service teachers on methodology. Together, they collaborated on the creation of a showcase lesson that integrated as much technology as possible.

The pedagogy pals, says King, were instructed to ensure their tech buddies developed a pedagogically sound lesson, one that wasn't just "edu-taining and full of bells and whistles" but covered the required content. When Germ reflected on her experiences with her pedagogy pal, she recognized she was given the opportunity to take part in something practical, authentic and extremely valuable.

"I think this project really helped prepare me for my own teaching career by giving me the opportunity to go out into an actual classroom setting with the SMART products. I was able to work one-on-one with a teacher, first as a tutor, and then as a learner. That provided me with some excellent insights into teaching and gave me strategies that I can eventually put to use in my own classroom. That's definitely beneficial. I'll carry that with me," says Germ.

Like King's pre-service teachers, the participating Polk County teachers have been resoundingly positive in their analysis of the project. Many of the teams stay in contact, and the service teachers are happy to remain as pedagogy pals to their tech buddies.

"I have found that so many of these teachers just pick up on the mentoring aspect immediately and, because of that, have given their tech buddies great input and insight into the world of teaching," says King. She is already receiving e-mails from other Polk County teachers asking to be a part of the project in the fall of 2009.



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Florida Southern College
Lakeland, Florida



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Next steps

King feels two questions remain to be addressed by her SMART Integration Project. One, do service teachers continue to integrate SMART products after their five weeks of participating in the project? And two, do pre-service teachers, once they hit the real world, continue to be advocates and adopters of instructional technology?

She plans to explore the first question by conducting a survey of the participating service teachers, asking them to what extent they have continued to incorporate SMART products into their instruction. This will begin in the fall of 2009, with the help of some of her graduate students. The second question will take a bit more time to answer. Some years from now, King plans to survey her former instructional technology students and determine the role instructional technology plays in their teaching.

Until then, King maintains the SMART Integration Project has been more than successful, and it will continue to be part of her instructional technology courses in the semesters to come. She believes it can be easily duplicated by other college and university education programs, but cautions that a number of pieces have to be in place for a successful implementation. King says an education department must have a prerequisite technology course as a part of its teacher certification program. Key to that is a relationship with SMART as the provider of classroom technology products. A strong association must also exist between the college and a school or school district that has fully adopted SMART products, explains King. Perhaps most importantly, it seems clear to everyone involved that a project like this requires a visionary leader who is willing to do the work necessary to ensure the relationships are fostered and are beneficial.

By all accounts, King's students are already on the road to becoming leaders in technology-enabled schools, and can be proud of helping service teachers become better facilitators and integrators of instructional technology. Glass feels that by being a part of the project, she helped her pedagogy pal become "more optimistic about how she could potentially use SMART products in her classroom and in her teaching."

Germ agrees, adding she now recognizes the role technology can play in the classroom. "With the help of my buddy teacher, I saw SMART products engage the students and really get them to think outside the box. The students can truly get hands on, and I found that helps them gain a better and more thorough understanding of the content."

As far as King is concerned, the project will continue to evolve and expand, but the triangular and mutually beneficial relationship among SMART, the students of Florida Southern College and the teachers in Polk County schools will remain at the center of it all. "These relationships are the best kind," she says. "These are the kind that as a professor you want your students to develop. This is real life experience." **EC**

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