Pushing Technology Integration: Professional Development in the 21st Century

Computer technology has been in most classrooms for years, and in some for decades. Traditionally, computers have been used to get things done, such as writing papers or creating images. Since the Web 2.0 transformation, though, it has become something different. The new challenge is putting it to good use, and the big question is, "How do I apply this to teaching?"

The newest computer technology is more often about communication, and collaboration, and expanding the reach of students even to the entire planet. In order to be effective, teachers must be aware of the potential benefits, as well as the risks that technology presents to students. This opens up an entirely new realm of professional development responsibility, and teachers are very often willing participants. That is, if they get the support they need.

"I felt it was important to take our teachers from the 'how to use it' stage to the 'how do I integrate it' stage," says Trish Panknin, Director of Career and Technical Education at Tuloso-Midway ISD in Corpus Christi, Texas. Panknin has been working to keep her teachers up to speed with technology for a number of years, and now she's focusing on integration, or the real-world application of technology to learning.

Over the last several years Panknin has developed a program that's motivating teachers to become tech-aware and highly competent, and in return they get what teachers often want most—classroom resources. By completing State Board for Educator (SBEC) standards-based coursework, teachers are entered in a drawing for cameras, projectors, computers, and other technology for their students.

Now Panknin is moving her district to the next level. "I actually came up with the idea when I was writing our district's technology plan last year," she explains. "I knew we needed a lot of emphasis on integration so I included a lot of training in our plan."

That training takes form as a 30-hour technology camp, called "iCAMP", held weekday evenings throughout the semester. The goal is to show teachers how new communications tools such as blogs and podcasts work, then show them how to use them to improve student achievement. Only teachers who have completed the original program's four levels of competency are eligible.

The reward to teachers for this personal investment of time is substantial. First, they acquire tools to implement directly into the classroom, and they will collect feedback from the students to gauge progress. Second, they keep a portfolio as evidence of their professional development success. Third, they receive $2000 in technology equipment to use in class. Finally, a $500 stipend shows teachers that their effort is truly appreciated.

"My ultimate goal is to get 80% of our teachers through iCAMP within the next two years. Yes, it's an aggressive goal but I truly hope I can find the funding to make it happen."

Panknin says Atomic Learning is the largest component of her technology integration plan. Besides covering common tasks in over 205 popular software applications, Atomic Learning has created training on 21st century skills such as communication and collaboration, digital citizenship, and critical thinking.

Problem: Transitioning a successful teacher tech training program from "how do I use it?" to "how do I integrate it?"

Solution: Creating an intensive, rewards-based training program focused on practical application of technology

Outcome: Confident teachers implementing innovative strategies to impact long-term student success

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Over the past school year, Tuloso-Midway ISD upgraded to the new Atomic Learning 21st Century Skills Professional Development package, which offers a number of mechanisms to help teachers use technology effectively. Workshops are collections of tutorials designed to explore a concept in-depth. Activity-based projects are learning tools that are as useful to teachers as to students. Self-assessments let teachers identify areas of strength and weakness in their tech knowledge. Along with Atomic Learning's highly customizable web-based platform, these tools create an effective foundation to any professional development plan.

Panknin has found that teachers are enthusiastic about her program. "The teachers helping me to develop this plan have been awesome. It is definitely a team effort and would not be possible without [them]," she says.

After eight iCAMP sessions, Panknin is happy with progress. She says the program has given her teachers the confidence needed to implement new teaching strategies. "I am absolutely amazed at some of the things our teachers are doing with their students. We have first graders blogging!" she says. That's impressive, and those same students are also creating video tutorials to help their parents use the teachers' web pages. They are digital natives, and their schools are supporting them well.

Of course, the idea has always been that students should be the largest benefactor of technology integration in the classroom. Panknin's district has more than 3500 students, so this program has the potential to guide many young lives safely and productively into a 21st century global society. The ability to use new technology is crucial, but students must also be aware of the importance of using it wisely and respecting diversity in collaboration.

In this time of economic strain, funding is a challenge as well. Panknin says that she's concerned about paying for the extra classes in future years. With a goal of 80% I-CAMP completion, she's seeking funding wherever it's available. By taking advantage of training through Atomic Learning, she has stretched her dollars beyond what she could offer through internal means.

With over 3500 students and 225 teachers in her charge, Panknin puts it best: "We are taking baby steps but at least we're walking! We know the teachers need and want help but time and money are always issues. Even though we're asking them to come at night, we hope they see this as an opportunity to increase their value in the classroom and therefore offer their students more chances for success. We're making this up as we go but hopefully, with resources such as Atomic Learning, we'll be successful in our journey."

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