

Interactive Whiteboards - The Basics and Beyond

By Edward S. Lee

Question: What is an interactive whiteboard?

Answer: An interactive whiteboard merges three separate pieces of technology, creating a powerful new way of presenting information in classrooms and boardrooms alike. Simply put, the board is an input device that essentially "replaces" the keyboard and mouse on your computer.

Instead of using your keyboard or mouse, you navigate your menus and make mouse-clicks through touch via fingertips or color coded pens. You make inputs to your computer by touching directly on the large surface of the whiteboard, allowing you and your students or staff to "interact" with the content that is projected onto the whiteboard (your computer's desktop).

The three main components needed to make a typical system work are:

- 1) A computer (PC or Mac depending on the whiteboard manufacturer)
- 2) An interactive whiteboard
- 3) A projector (some whiteboard manufacturers sell "integrated" systems that include a board and a projector that can be purchased as a package).

In general, there are two types of boards:

- 1) Separate or stand-alone board - These are ideally mounted directly to a wall and require a separate projection system to be purchased and installed along with the board. The stand-alone boards can also be mounted on a mobile floor stand. The mobile stands work fine, but are sometimes not well suited to classes with younger students since any movement of the board from bumping etc can cause the board to become mis-aligned or out of orientation with the projector. This is easily fixed, but can be disruptive to your lessons etc. The stand-alone boards do not have the option for height adjustability.
- 2) Integrated Boards - These boards come in the same sizes as the stand-alone boards but also include a "short-throw" projector built in to the system. In general, the integrated systems give more flexibility, help offset installation cost and save time in terms of installation since no additional electrical work is needed when installing an integrated system.

Interactive whiteboard systems are usually installed at least semi-permanently on a wall and dedicated to a particular room. For the most part, a wall installation is preferred.

There may be regional installation issues that you may not be aware of as well. For example, in the City of Chicago, there are additional building codes that must be adhered to when doing certain kinds of cable runs in certain areas of a building. This will translate into additional costs for special cables and most likely, increased labor costs due to the increased complexity of the installation.

Many resellers are "technology integrators" and professionally install whiteboard systems. A trusted integrator can be a valuable resource and ongoing partner to your school or organization especially if you have a large number of rooms to install or are integrating an interactive whiteboard into a more complex audio-visual system.

Don't Forget the Software

The usefulness of these high-tech tools doesn't end with hardware. In fact, the hardware is only the beginning. The software and the interactive "communities" that have developed along with these tools can greatly enhance the impact and effectiveness of your overall technology program.

Be sure to evaluate the software tools that are offered by the various interactive whiteboard manufacturers to be sure that they will deliver the results that you are looking for in terms of your overall strategy. Most boards come with general annotation functionality while others offer extended capabilities such as lesson planning tools (for educational users) or special packages focused on math skills for math teachers. Some may also offer and include software packages designed specifically for corporate users to help enhance and streamline their presentations and meetings whether they are held in person or over greater distances.

There's no reason to be scared off by this new generation of presentation tools. They are simpler to implement and easier to use than you might think. The use of this technology is now very common and is likely in use in your local area. With a little research and guidance from a trusted professional, you can quickly make the next steps toward advancing your school or other organization to the next level with this current technology.