Chapter 29
Documenting Teachers and Students Experiences with Interactive Whiteboards in Ireland:
Key Findings from an Irish Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT

This case study discusses the key findings from a pilot Interactive Whiteboard Project in Ireland which ran from 2005 to 2007. Eight primary and secondary schools were involved. The project exemplifies a bottom-up initiative as it was neither government funded nor supported. Findings indicate that Interactive Whiteboards were well received and utilized by teachers and students whose views on the benefits of IWBs reveal strong correlations. Despite a lack of national policy guidance and funding for this technology in Ireland, IWBs are becoming increasingly popular. However, there is a danger that this policy vacuum will create its own problems as schools increasingly rely on IWB suppliers for advice and direction on how to proceed. It may also have digital divide implications as more affluent schools are better able to fund this technology.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This case study will discuss the key findings from a pilot Interactive Whiteboard Project in Ireland which ran from 2005 to 2007. This pilot, involving eight Dublin schools, is an interesting example of a bottom-up-initiative as it was neither government funded nor supported. Instead Cláir Bhána Idirghníomhacha (Gaelic for Interactive Whiteboard Project) or the CBI project as it is known locally, was initiated by an ICT educa-

tion advisor based in the Drumcondra Education Centre in Dublin. Although all 275 local schools were invited to participate in the project, only 8 responded with expressions of interest, which was somewhat disappointing. However, this lack of response probably tells its own story about the lack of appetite and enthusiasm among many teachers for school-based ICT and its attendant change implications.

During the 1990s, Ireland embarked on an ambitious program to computerize all schools. Under its "Schools IT 2000 – A Policy framework for the New Millennium" initiative, a sum of €51 million was allocated to investment in ICT for schools over the period 1997-2000. Since then, however, despite the roaring Celtic Tiger economy, now defunct, ICT in schools has suffered as a result of both underfunding and a lack of guidance when it comes to national policy in this key area. Consequently the quality of ICT provision in schools in the aftermath of "Schools IT 2000" has come to depend largely on the enthusiasm of a dedicated staff member who has ICT expertise and motivational skills to inspire others, the committed school principal prepared to prioritize ICT development, and parents with sufficient wealth to fund the purchase of up-to-date technology. Unfortunately, this has led to the uneven development of ICT across schools nationally and a situation where Cuban's (1986, p. 5) "exhilaration/ scientific/credibility/disappointment" innovation cycle is very much in evidence.

Given this situation, it is easy to understand why a mere 3% of schools contacted volunteered to participate in the pilot IWB project. It also helps to explain why, when compared to our nearest neighbors, the UK, who already had national strategies in place to endorse this technology (Higgins et. al., 2007), Ireland was behind the curve when it came to the deployment of IWBs. Effectively, a lack of policy direction and leadership in relation to educational ICT meant that an awareness of this relatively new technology had yet to register at a national level.

Undeterred, the ICT advisor put a small team together to drive the project comprising himself as project manager, two teachers from each of the 8 schools, a researcher from a local university and two project sponsors, Computer Education Society of Ireland the Computer Society of Ireland. These sponsors funded the purchase of one interactive whiteboard per school, a data projector and associated software.

The eight schools comprised three primary schools, three second level schools, one GaelScoil (i.e. an all Irish-speaking Primary School) and a secondary school for deaf girls. Two of the schools were located in disadvantaged communities while two other schools were located in affluent city suburbs. Three different board types – Promethean, SmartBoard and Hitachi were distributed among the schools. These were chosen because they represented the three major IWB board manufacturers at the time. The Promethean boards were placed in the three mainstream primary schools while the Smart and Hitachi models were distributed across the remaining schools. Each school agreed to dedicate two teachers to the project who committed to take part in training and use the board for the bulk of their teaching. This was achieved by replacing the main blackboard with an IWB. Participants were also required to attend regular project meetings hosted by the ICT advisor who initiated the project and who managed its dedicated website and discussion forum (http:// www.cbiproject.net). These meetings took place three times per term and provided networking and professional development opportunities for the project participants.

PROJECT RATIONALE, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The rationale behind the project was straightforward. Acutely aware of the substantial investment and support at policy level for IWBs in the UK (Kitchen et al., 2006), the local ICT advisor real-

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