

Local teachers engage students with technology in the classroom

By Bonnie Gordon
For the Monitor

Classroom teachers from school districts around northern New Mexico attended the 21st Century Classroom workshop July 19-22 at UNM-Los Alamos. At the workshop, teachers learned to use some of the latest techniques for using technology to engage their students. The training focused on the use of interactive whiteboards, Internet resources and student response devices that have been successfully incorporated into classrooms as well as discussions with experienced teachers who use technology to enhance their teaching methods. Teachers returned to their classrooms with many new ideas. On Nov. 6, some of the workshop participants were back at UNM-LA for a follow-up session to share their experiences with incorporating technology in their classrooms.

Math teacher John Pawlak from Los Alamos High School has been using software provided by textbook companies to generate tests and quizzes that provide instant feedback to student and teacher. The software can generate statistics that make it clear what percentage of the students are understanding the material and even track statistics for individual students.

Pawlak is especially excited about the interactive “clickers” he is using with his students. Students are issued a clicker through which they respond to questions projected on an interactive screen. Students can see what percentage of the class has responded and what percentage answered correctly.

“You can take kids who usually hide in the classroom and get them engaged this way,” said Pawlak. “Kids take it as a challenge. They love the clickers.”

Pawlak said most of the teachers at his school are not taking full advantage of the available technology. “Technology is a risk, but everything has risks. Everyone is focusing on the risks instead of on the advantages. The US is trailing other countries in this area,” he said.

Other teachers in the group agreed. Several said administrators and school boards sometimes stand in the way of incorporating technology, especially the Internet into the classroom.

“Administrators and parents are trusting teachers with their students for hours each week. They need to trust us to use technology appropriately in our classrooms,” said Pawlak.

Julia Agnew Bell teaches recreational reading, drama and creative arts at Los Alamos Middle School. Her students recently used a guided Web Quest to learn about drama around the world. Students used a website called questgarden.com to follow links set up by the instructor to learn about drama around the world and to see video clips of performances. Students were only able to access links incorporated into the Web Quest, so no inappropriate material could be accessed. The students then created brochures about the form of drama they had chosen from their research. In her drama class, Agnew Bell uses flip cameras to record her class so they can learn from their own performances. The kids loved these activities, she said.

Math teacher Katie Lake and English teacher Nina Quintana of Bernalillo High School feel very strongly about incorporating technology into the classroom because in their district, many students do not have access to a computer at home. They are anxious to expose their students to the tools they will need to succeed in the modern world.

Both teachers use interactive “smart boards” that can capture material students and teachers write on it for later use and for students who miss class on a particular day. The notes are also useful because students can refer back them when they are posted on their class websites.

Lake likes the idea of posting her notes and worksheets because students don’t have to take notes in class if they don’t want to. They can listen and absorb the material, then read the notes later without worrying about whether they are writing down what is really essential.

Hari Khalsa of Pojoaque Valley High School pointed out that using interactive technology builds a sense of community among the students. “The kids are really into supporting each other,” she said. Online classes have become a tool for students who need to catch up in a particular subject in her district as well as an aid for students with learning disabilities.

Chris Carson, who advises the Espanola School District on technology issues, said he finds technology in the classroom is often relegated to drill and practice only, rather than being used as a creative tool. He is anxious to see educators become more innovative in their use of these new tools.

He and co-conference coordinator Dr. Carol Furchner of UNM-LA stressed that students are already deeply immersed in modern technology in their daily lives and will need modern technological skills to advance in their future careers.

“One of my favorite quotes from a student to a teacher is, ‘Prepare me for my future, not for your past,’” Furchner said.