Educating the Video-Game Generation

It’s not just about middle schools bringing technology into the classroom; they must learn to integrate it into the curriculum, too.

by Dedra Stafford

How do our classrooms compete with the real world when it comes to technology? The children we are educating in our middle schools today are different from the students of the past. These students are “digital kids.”

They don’t remember a world without cell phones, computers, online games, e-mail, or digital cameras. They have the multitask ability to chat online with several friends in different conversations and research their term paper at the same time. Moreover, these tasks can all be accomplished with ease while heads are bobbing to the latest release of downloaded music on their headphones.

These digital kids are stimulated in the cyberworld, and we as educators have to make sure they are just as stimulated in the classroom of the 21st century. This can be a very difficult task. Educators must continually reassess their teaching strategies to incorporate the ever-changing world of technology.

To keep these kids actively engaged in education, the answer seems to be technology integration. Many middle schools are beginning to see the need for seamless technology integration. To do this, schools must approach technology in a three-part plan. First, they need to have up-to-date operating equipment that meets the needs of the district. Then they must invest in ongoing, well-developed technology staff development. And finally, they need to encompass some sort of recognition and evaluation of teachers to ensure that integration of technology is occurring.

The Latest Classroom Technology

Some of the latest technology equipment made for schools today has remarkable capabilities. Middle schools can enhance their performance by using some of the following tools:

**Printers/Scanners.** With the trend toward more data-driven decision, these units have the ability to scan and score standardized tests on plain paper. This not only can give immediate feedback to teachers and administrations, but because they cost a lot less than the special cardstock Scantrons, assessments can be done more frequently.

**SMART Boards.** Use of whiteboard or SMART Board records step-by-step work teachers and middle school students do at the board every day. These recordings can be uploaded to Web pages, played as short video clips illustrating step-by-step work, and easily accessed by students from home. Teachers may even use these boards to review a lesson for home-based learning.

**Flex/Document Cameras.** These are inexpensive tabletop projection devices with a flexible goosenecked camera. It is a quick, easy, affordable way for middle schools to place new technology in the hands of both students and teachers. Live demonstrations, artwork, and projects are easily transferred to the television screen. “This is a ‘must have’ for every school to help their technology-resistant teachers get their feet wet,” says Cheryl McInnis, media director at Mustang North Middle School in Oklahoma.

**Projectors.** Projectors are now affordable for classroom use. Schools can have several in a building or perhaps one per team. Use of these projectors to bring PowerPoint presentations, Internet, or even video into the classroom can capture the attention and engage learners in even a one-computer classroom.

**PDA Handhelds.** Also called handheld computers, these are lightweight and small enough to
held in one hand. These portable devices have great capabilities. They can download the basic office software, access the Internet, and link to your desktop computer. Many schools are leasing PDAs (personal digital assistants) to students or making them available for purchase. One school with such devices in the classroom is NorthStar Middle School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. It ran a nine-week experiment with Palm Pilots, which were donated by Palm Inc., in an effort to enhance student organization and improve communications. The experiment was cited as successful and the benefits were more effective collection, organizing, reviewing, and sharing of information with greater access to information inside and outside the classroom.

**Blog postings are just starting to seep into the classroom, taking the place of the traditional journal or diary. Blogs will intrigue a middle school student where typical pencil and paper will not by creating a classroom that goes beyond the confines of the school walls. All students share/post their thoughts and opinions online, providing for open-ended discussion.**

**Staff Development**

Professional development in technology is needed like never before in education. But only professional development that is incorporated into the school year with direction and support will make a difference. Staff should be surveyed and sessions should be set up based on the needs of particular groups and ability levels. Many school districts are using the “train the trainer” method, where they bring in knowledgeable people to train a select group of tech-savvy teachers, who will in turn go back and train other teachers at their own school sites.

Another way to ensure consistent, well-executed staff development is to hire a technology coordinator. This person must be someone who has an understanding of technology, a firm grasp of the curriculum, and a unique ability to teach in a user-friendly way that inspires and motivates even the more resistant teacher to use technology in his or her curriculum.

**Motivating Your Staff**

Principals should be asking teachers two things: “What forms of technology are you using in your classroom as instructional tools and/or communications tools?” and “How do you have the students using technology as part of the curriculum?” Once the investment has been made in the equipment and training, teachers should be held accountable for the results.

Some states have technology standards or benchmarks for students at each grade level. Providing teachers with the tools to integrate technology is the easy part; getting them to actually do it can be the real challenge. Using yearly evaluations to make teachers accountable, and giving recognition to the teachers who act as technology leaders of the district, will get the job accomplished. Acknowledgement can take the form of awards and certificates, a district-paid technology workshop, or awards of needed technology equipment for the classroom.

**The Challenge Ahead**

Technology integration in fast becoming one of the biggest challenges of education. Our future schools will have technology everywhere, just like our future world. The new age is exciting, but as this video-game generation is moving through the halls of our middle schools, educators will need to move fast to keep up. Bringing the computers in and setting them on teachers’ desks will no longer suffice. We are obliged to not only educate our students, but also furnish them with the tools to compete in this information age. These digital kids require a stimulating environment in the classroom, and the key to their stimulation and their success in the future work force will require that middle school educators join the rest of the world by embracing technology on a daily basis, realizing what it can do for the classroom.

As principals, we will need to set the model by continuing to find new ways to incorporate technology into our daily lives and commend teachers who are boldly moving into the “New Age.” We must continue to challenge ourselves as we challenge our students.

*Dedra Stafford is an educational consultant for Wizard Workshops Consulting, and an instructional technology trainer for Mustang Public Schools in Oklahoma. Her e-mail address is wizardworkshops@cox.net.*