

# Strength in Numbers

**EDCompass** newsletter

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## Peer Sharing Key to Successful Professional Development

By **Christine Roulston**

When professors and students from [Texas Tech University](#) visited Candace Tickle's first-grade class in Lubbock, Texas, they weren't there to teach but rather to learn. Tickle and her five- and six-year-old students spent a full period walking the college students through the basics of how to operate the [SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard](#) and the [SMART Document Camera](#).

As endearing as the exercise was, it was more than that – Tickle believes that experiences like these, in which teachers expose peers to evolving classroom technology, are vital to developing effective teachers and teaching practices. "If I hadn't had constant professional development from when I graduated to now, I'd be lacking," she says. "And a gap in my learning means a gap in the kids' learning."

Tickle is among a growing group of SMART users who want to share their technology expertise and expand their skills. This May, [Lubbock Independent School District](#) will host a SMART user event, in which 40 teachers like Tickle will spend a day helping 200 to 300 others get the most out of their SMART products. Over the past few years, like-minded educators across the country have been holding similar events, where in addition to gaining practical skills, participants walk away with a sense of empowerment and enthusiasm that helps them take advantage of their classroom technology and bring out the best in their students.



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**Candace Tickle**

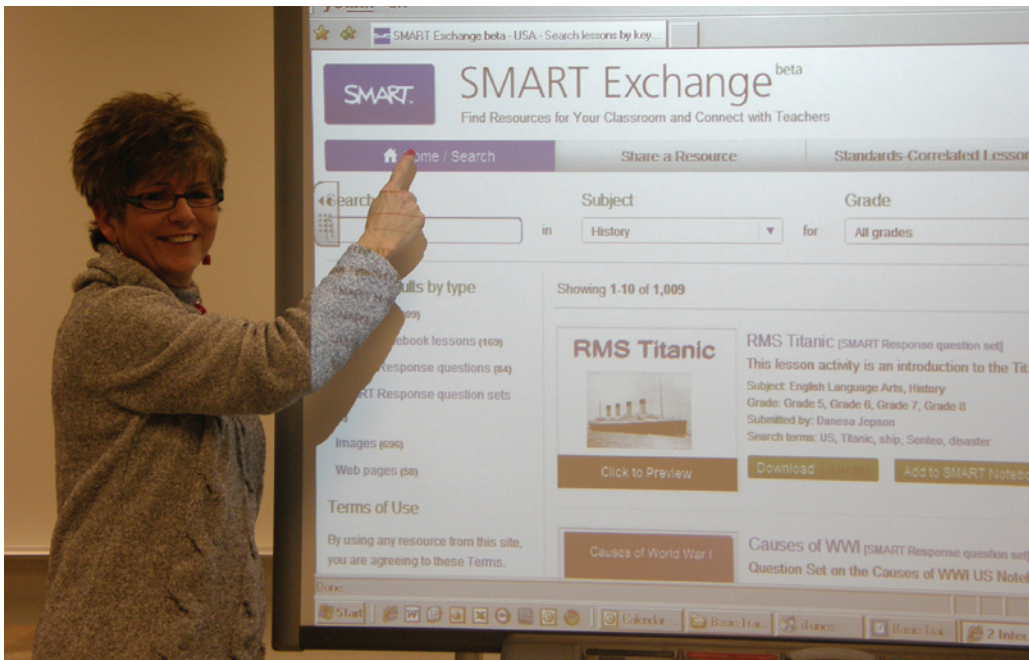
First-Grade Teacher  
Waters Elementary  
Lubbock, Texas

### The power of the peer

Lubbock is widely viewed as an example of successful district technology adoption. Its top-down integration of SMART Board interactive whiteboards shows how well-implemented technology can enhance student outcomes. The key to its success is professional development, something Bill Landis, director of instructional technology, says is built on a core group of SMART-certified teachers.

Landis regularly sends a dozen educators, including Tickle, to intensive SMART training sessions and state conferences. These educators become [SMART Certified Trainers](#) and return to diffuse what they have learned, helping their peers use their SMART products effectively. "They really help us understand what's coming down the pipe and determine what kind of training we need to be doing," Landis says. Ultimately, the group helps improve return on investment. "The boards are so intuitive that teachers can get started on their own, but the user groups really provide that extra level of support. You don't need people at central office continually going out and training them. They will usually take off and do it themselves."

Obe Hostetter is an instructional technology resource teacher at [Rockingham County Public Schools](#) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and is part of the Shenandoah Valley SMART User Group. Drawing on the enthusiasm of SMART users in his area, Hostetter organized an event in August for 400 area teachers. The presenters, current teachers and SMART users chosen by Hostetter, provided professional development on every grade level and subject. The presentations ranged from general sessions on finding and sharing SMART Notebook™ lesson activities to more specific interests such as using SMART products in an English language learner (ELL) environment.



He agrees that user groups and user group events give teachers something the district technology office and formalized technology training can't. "Not all teachers take advantage of the services I have to offer," Hostetter says. "But a one-day conference with a variety of people becomes a fun event to attend. Part of the learning is the social part that comes from sharing tips and tricks with fellow teachers – not just from the presenters."

Ginny Washburne, one of SMART's education consulting team leads in North America, has hosted several large user events in the Chicago area. She has learned that teachers look forward to the networking aspect of these conferences. "Teachers are busy, and it's difficult to find time to talk to colleagues about lesson ideas. So when teachers get the chance to attend a large user event and get different perspectives on something they're trying to do, it's extremely valuable."

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### Building communities, transplanting ideas

The networking doesn't stop once teachers leave the user event. Teachers share lessons through e-mail groups and send lesson activities to Hostetter, who posts them on his Ning, which has more than 4,100 members. Similarly, at Lubbock, teachers regularly send lesson activities to a group of demonstration teachers who review the activities and determine which are the most applicable district-wide. The selected lesson activities are posted on the district's intranet. "This method encourages teachers to share, and it encourages them to expand on the ways in which they use their SMART Boards," says Landis. "It also leads to important improvement in the delivery of lessons."

SMART users at Lubbock have also used public blogs to communicate and share, but recently teachers wanted an option that would allow only their peers access to the site. Lubbock started to group SMART users teaching the same grade level or subject and set them up on private blogs. "When it's in your community, you're much more willing to say, 'Gee, I don't know how to do this.' Then someone tells you, 'You just need to press this and this,' and it works great," Landis says.

SMART user communities have also started to expand beyond the walls of the school and even the district through the Internet. Lubbock is located in West Texas, a few hours from Dallas and Austin, so many district teachers turn to online forums to share ideas and expertise more widely. The **SMART Exchange™ online community** features different user groups, including one that Texas educators can use to collaborate with each other and share best practices and classroom success stories. "To have a community where we can share makes a huge difference," says Sherry Mitchell, an instructional technology specialist at Lubbock.

#### Obe Hostetter

Instructional Technology Resource  
Teacher  
Rockingham County Public Schools  
Harrisonburg, Virginia



Further encouraging Lubbock teachers to form connections with other SMART users, Landis sends those who have adopted a leadership role within the user groups to statewide technology conferences. “Their enthusiasm ignites and their bond becomes much stronger – to the point that two or three years later those people are still in touch with each other, and they’re still talking about the technology. This creates a learning community that’s not tied to a particular school.”

### Hosting your own SMART user event

SMART user events can range widely in size and degree of formality. *EDCompass™* newsletter gathered the following advice to help teachers and administrators planning to host their own event.

#### *Promote it*

Leading up to the user event at Rockingham Public Schools in Harrisonburg, Virginia, Hostetter advertised on [Twitter](#), [SMART Board Revolution Ning](#), the SMART Exchange, [VSTE Ning](#), the Virginia ITRT e-mail listserv and the local television station and newspaper. As a result, they attracted attendees from North Carolina, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, Ohio and Massachusetts, plus two presenters from Illinois.

#### *Start small*

Washburne says the right number of participants really depends on the space the district has available and the number of facilitators the district can secure. She notes that a maximum of 20 to 30 people per room is best. “I don’t think there’s a magic number, but you want to get enough people to make it worth the while,” she says. Hostetter adds that small groups allow for hands-on practice and let the facilitator give the participants one-on-one attention.

#### *Build in time to network*

According to Washburne, educators need opportunities to network with others, even if it’s just during lunch. “They often get to the point where they know the ins and outs of the software, but the power of a user group or conference comes from the chance to talk to one another about how they’re using a tool in SMART Notebook in a new way to achieve a specific goal. The more you can do to facilitate those kinds of conversations and sharing, the better.”

#### *Tailor sessions to the skill levels of the participants*

It’s important to understand attendees’ level of expertise and their areas of interest. At the last user event in Chicago, 80 percent of participants identified themselves as novice users. “Naturally in this case, we wanted most of the breakout sessions focused on first steps and integrating existing resources into the curriculum,” Washburne says.

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#### **Ginny Washburne**

Team Lead – Central,  
Education Consulting  
SMART Technologies  
Chicago, Illinois



*Pick the right facilitators*

Washburne adds, "I think another key is having teachers as facilitators because they are currently using the technology in the classroom on a daily basis. They know the struggles the teachers have, and they're able to give them advice on how to use the technology effectively."

*Start slowly*

Many districts do their SMART user training over a condensed period of time but never revisit it, a strategy Landis asserts is ineffective. "Teachers need time to get used to what the technology can do so training needs to be spaced out over time," Landis says. "If I were to tell a teacher, on the first day we're going to learn SMART Board basics, on the second day we'll do advanced and on the third day we'll create and share lessons, it's no wonder teachers forget what they've learned." Administrators in Lubbock have learned that the most successful teachers receive professional development on a regular basis so they have a chance to test what they learn and have their questions addressed.

**Reaping the rewards**

As part of his job, Landis regularly conducts audits on how technology is being used in his district. When he walks into a classroom, about 95 percent of the time he sees the SMART Board interactive whiteboard in use. "I don't know of anything, not a whiteboard or a TV, not anything, that is being used to the extent we see the SMART Board utilized." He credits this success directly to the professional development that has taken place in the district, the ownership teachers feel for the technology and the initiative they take to work together.

Landis and Tickle are looking forward to taking this successful strategy to a larger audience as they gear up to host the district's first large SMART user event in May. At the conference, Tickle will be passing on what she has learned at user events across her state and the country, knowledge she hopes the attendees will disseminate to teachers and students in their home schools.

Tickle sums it up: "As teachers, we want to learn all there is to know. The SMART users stay in touch with teachers in their grade level and keep learning. If I know all I can about this technology, I can get the most out of my kids in the most effective way." **EC**

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**Bill Landis**

Director of Instructional Technology  
Lubbock Independent School District  
Lubbock, Texas

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