Getting the Most Out of Your 1:1 Chromebook Program

Written by Shauna Polson

The Challenge

Figuring out how to maximize the impact of a 1:1 program is easier said than done. There's more to it than handing out devices.

The Approach

Focus on student experience. Think about how the devices can enhance teaching and learning, as opposed to just digitizing them.

The Result

Effective 1:1 programs increase student engagement, pride of ownership, and collaboration for improved experiences and performance.

A s part of a small district pilot, I received a brand new Samsung Chromebooks to incorporate into my classroom. Exciting, right? My mind suddenly became a maelstrom of new possibilities, new pathways to transform learning.

There's just one caveat—I was given these devices with no specific parameters or guidelines on how to actually use them effectively.

Believe it or not, the story I am describing above is quite common. Over the last five to ten years, many organizations have been making the move towards putting a device in the hands of every student, whether part of a BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) or 1:1 program. But that is often where it ends. Robert Schuetz describes this well in a blog about his own 1:1 experience entitled, Is One-to-One a False Summit? In it, he explains that his ultimate goal for the program was to ensure every student had an iPad.

Over time, however, he came to realize that, "putting a device in every kid's hands can certainly be an educational game changer, but the tech implementation is only a means, not an end."

So as soon as I brought the devices into my classroom, I decided to hit the ground running. Since I am a secondary Spanish teacher, on the average day I see five different classes, with up to 32 students in each class. Therefore, my ultimate goal was to maximize the impact of one set of devices across all five classes, while at the same time provide opportunities for authentic, realworld experiences and language development. This has certainly been a work in progress, but after three years, I can't imagine my classroom without the innovation and creativity resulting from direct student access to technology. And although my class set of Chromebooks has greatly facilitated this process, my 1:1 success does

not rest solely on the devices themselves, but rather on how my students use them to enhance their learning.

For those of you who are on your own 1:1 journey (especially if you just had 32 Chromebooks dropped on your front door), I'd like to share a few words of advice from my experience.

Start Thinking Beyond the Devices

Over the last decade, there has been a pedagogical shift towards more student-centered and inquiry-based learning. We're seeing more differentiation and individualization than ever before as educators attempt to meet the different learning styles and needs of all their students.

Don't be fooled into thinking that the educators finding success in this student-centered world did so by choosing the 'right' device. In fact, the real transformation happens when you look beyond your Chromebooks or iPads to where the real learning happens—the learning management system (LMS).

An LMS can be essential to effective blended learning. Without an LMS, student performance is virtually the same in both traditional and blended/online environments.

Effects of Traditional, Blended and E-Learning on Students' Achievement"
by Al-Qahtani, Awadh A.y., and S.E. Higgins

If you want to get the most out of your 1:1 program, you need to think about the digital environment that ties all your devices together. All too often, the LMS is more of an afterthought instead of a serious consideration, but it is the catalyst that turns those devices into powerful learning tools.

I use Schoology's LMS because its connects my students together in collaborative learning experiences that extend well beyond my classroom walls.

Great platforms, such as this, can help educators create and deliver materials no matter what devices they or their students are using. For example, the built-in microphone and webcam on Chromebooks and tablets can be used for audio/visual recordings on Schoology assignments, discussions, and even test/quiz short answers.

Having an LMS has helped me centralize everything from my instructional resources to the messages sent to me by my students and their parents. This not only simplifies my educational workflows, but it also solves a growing problem in our technology saturated world—too many logins.

One of the most common complaints my students have voiced is that there are so many websites to remember across all of their classes. This has led to a bevy of usernames and passwords to memorize; however, it's no longer an issue since more and more teachers at my school have started using the same LMS.

A Conscious Shift in Pedagogy

After I paired my Chromebooks with an equally powerful learning environment, I was able to turn my attention towards the learning experience. I focused on some important questions, such as how can I effectively prepare my students for the real world? Am I providing opportunities for my students to connect globally?

I must admit, it was tempting to think of my Chromebooks as a means to reduce paper and keep students organized. Even though this is true, I had to remind myself that the Chromebook is a resource that has the potential to enhance my instruction, not just digitize it.

Simply replacing paper worksheets with Google Docs isn't enough to improve the learning experience. I needed to push my students to show their understanding in more creative, non-traditional ways.

When designing an activity or task that incorporates technology, I find it is essential to start with the heart of the lesson, or what I want the outcome to be. Similar to building lessons via Backwards Design, I determine what my students need to know by the end of the lesson or unit and then consider how

specific technology can help me accomplish this goal.

So now as I am planning my lessons, I ask myself whether or not my students can do the same task on paper? If the answer is yes, I modify or redefine my activity to take full advantage of available online resources or Web 2.0 tools.

As a result, my students continue to eagerly show their creativity and knowledge. They create high-quality and engaging projects such as videos, digital stories, and how-to guides to name a few. The bottom line is that you will need to make a conscious effort to purposely integrate your technology, and not just use it to replace paper.

Build on Your 1:1 Successes

In my experience, the most significant benefit of going 1:1 has been increased student engagement, pride of ownership, and collaboration. Even though much of this transformation was planned, the organic nature of this shift is undeniable. So as you iterate on your strategy, pay close attention to your wins, no matter how small they are, and build on them.

My students enjoy using Schoology, so I have continued to rely heavily on it to enhance my lessons. With the LMS as my digital hub, my students can easily collaborate whether in the system or by using online resources such as Google Docs and Drawings, Web 2.0 tools such as Thinglink, Padlet, and much more.

I've also found that my students thrive with a larger audience for their work. By publishing their work online (as videos, posters, guides, portfolios, etc.), my students are much more motivated and have become more accountable. They care more about the quality of their work when they know I'm not their only critic.

Taking this expansion even further, I wanted to make sure my students have opportunities to broaden their global perspectives. As a language teacher, it's important for me to expose my students to the rich cultures that go hand-in-hand with the language they are learning.

The real world is out there, and it can make learning experiences far more meaningful even from the comfort and safety of your classroom. For example, I have been able to connect my students with classes in Spanish-speaking countries, such as Colombia, using Schoology, Skype, and Google Hangouts.

All in all, my 1:1 experience has been a success, but my journey is far from over. There have been ups and downs, but the benefits that I've witnessed have greatly outweighed the risks. In addition to everything I've shared with you today, I'm proud to say that my entire classroom culture has become one where my students feel comfortable taking risks, trying something new, and learning without hesitation.

If used effectively, technology can empower our students and give them a voice. But effective use of technology requires that we look beyond the tools and focus on the learning experience itself. Then, and only then, can we begin to transform education for the better. ●

* Read more of Schoology's best practices and guides

About the Author

After having taught Spanish at the elementary, high school, and undergraduate levels, Shauna Polson now resides in the Rocky Mountains, teaching Spanish at Boulder High School. As a blended learning enthusiast, she is constantly trying to incorporate new practices and techniques into her teaching through the exploration of technology. Shauna currently serves as the district's Technology Contact for Boulder H.S. and leader of the school Technology Committee. She is also a Contract Trainer for Schoology, leading onsite and web trainings for schools and districts across the United States.

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