The Tech Trainer

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Tech Deal of the Week
Two weeks left until the big day. This week's deal comes to us from Tiger Direct. Want to add blue ray support to your desktop computer. Tiger has an LG Blu-ray internal drive for $50. Two days only, today and tomorrow (Dec. 10-11).
www.tigerdirect.com

Playgrounds in the Classroom for Technological Exploration and Self-Guided Growth

Students learn at different paces and in different ways; we all know this is one of the main ideas behind differentiated instruction. How often do we really give students a chance to explore the world in their own way though? Many classrooms, big and small, still focus on the idea of the teacher as the center of the class. We use textbooks to guide our ideas and worksheets to reinforce them. How can we move from this setting to engage the students in a more independent way? Technology can help. What are a few ideas you can use in your classroom to promote curiosity, self-guided learning, and "play"? Here are a few examples:

1. Create assignments you can use without technology and then see how technology might bridge into the assignments. As an example let's look at a simple writing assignment. An average writing assignment involves students being presented with a topic or range of topics (a prompt if you will) and then students writing a paragraph or paper about that topic, either based on personal experience or research. Instead, arm your students with digital cameras or flip cameras (I know quantities are limited) and send them out in groups to explore the school and find something newsworthy. They then use the footage or photos and decide on a format to use to share with the rest of the class. This type of assignment is more open ended and promotes the students to take the assignment to a differing level though trial and error and exploration.

2. Use the technology you have in your room in a totally different way. As an example, turn your interactive board into a "question bank" or "photo bank" similar to jeopardy, but instead of "playing jeopardy" allow students to come up to the board from time to time to explore the questions on their own. Link slides to extra information and websites devoted to the topics or pictures on the board. Some students will not be able to resist touching or interacting with the board and will get into "research" as a result.

3. Use open source software to provide an outlet for students to attempt things that they cannot attempt every day and use broad assignments to encourage exploration (the term broad is referring to vehicle of exploration not necessarily topic). Allowing the form of the work to be open will often propel students in a direction that can't be anticipated and reinforces the student's ability to make decisions. For instance, setting up a sound recording booth at one of your computers or providing a video camera to those that might request it can lead to students discovering interests in podcasting, radio, and various other forms of communication. Other technology (microscopes, digital instruments, etc.) can lead to other self-discovery.

4. Change views of what is acceptable as an assignment submission. If you are building "forts" to go along with a student unit in social studies why can't a child turn in a "virtual" fort that he or she designed using computer software such as "Lego: Digital Designer." Opening up to new approaches can lead to big payoff.

Tech Tips of the Week

1. Did you know you can insert organizational charts into Word documents? It is as easy as clicking on the "insert" menu and then finding the selection called "object." You then need to select "Microsoft Organizational Chart" When the chart appears all you have to do is type to change the text.

2. Ever want to do a search for a topic but get random ideas from that search. Well maybe you should try the Banana SLUG search engine. You type in search terms and then select from a predefined category. It will often take you in directions you weren't thinking of going, and when students are doing research papers that sometimes isn't a bad idea (visit the site and check it out at www.bananaslug.com). *As with all websites, please check it out and see if you want to use it with students before recommending it.*