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## Embracing Classroom Technology

*An Arizona elementary school is beefing up its technology toolbox with a new multimedia curriculum in an effort to engage students, teach 21st century skills, and, hopefully, help boost academic achievement.*

By [Bridget McCrea](#) • 06/17/10

Valerie Gresser wasn't satisfied with the way her students were learning. A first-grade teacher at [Superstition Springs Elementary](#) in Mesa, AZ., Gresser wanted more for this new generation of learners, many of whom were already being exposed to technology on several fronts, and in various venues outside of school.

Like many teachers who see new technology available on the market but who can't capture it owing to limited resources, Gresser said she knew there were better tools available but faced the challenge of having just one computer in her classroom. That meant students had to huddle up around the screen to view the lessons and participate in computer-based classroom activities--hardly a recipe for success in a full classroom.

Still, Gresser said, she pressed on with her technology goals, convinced from past job experience and networking with other educators that equipment like interactive whiteboards, digital cameras, and projectors would go a long way in helping her create a 21st century learning environment at Superstition Springs Elementary. "I was part of a core group of teachers who attended presentations held by a [Smart Board](#) vendor," said Gresser. "I started learning about the Smart boards, got trained on how to use them, and started a pilot at my last school."

Gresser brought that knowledge to her new position, where she soon gained the support of the school's principal, Patty Rogers. "The entire [Gilbert School District](#) is going through a process we call 'Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships,'" said Rogers. "Our goal is to make education more applicable to the 21st century learner. Technology is a big part of that."

With Rogers's blessing, Gresser began looking for ways to turn her vision into a reality, all the while working within budget constraints. Her top-level goals included taking advantage of in-depth, online textbook content and teaching materials that would enhance her first-grade students' learning experiences. When a colleague mentioned that Scottsdale, AZ-based [CCS Presentation Systems](#) was offering a \$20,000 technology grant for teachers to design their ideal classroom, Gresser decided to apply for the funding.

"It was an open grant, based on the teacher's ability to design his or her 'ideal classroom,' incorporating various pieces of technology and showing how they would be used," explained Gresser. "I wrote up a plan and won the grant." Her proposal included the use of projectors, electronic whiteboards, document cameras, interactive electronic tables for data input, and entry-level digital cameras for student use.

Installation took place in September 2009 and found Gresser "taking what I was already using in the classroom" and incorporating the new technology into it. "I'm still using best practices and doing all of the professional development that my district offers," she said, "and just adding the technology component to the mix."

Gresser's first-grade classroom is equipped with a ceiling-mounted projector, an interactive whiteboard (where the projector image is displayed), an interactive electronic table for the students to input data, and a student-response system. The room is also outfitted with a wireless slate, a document camera, an audio system, two heavy-duty color printers, related hardware, and network wiring. Students were given cameras (for taking still and motion pictures) and use a system interfaced with Macintosh computers that are networked with Internet access.

Getting a boatload of new equipment at once was challenging for Gresser, who spent many late hours learning how to use the technology, she said. There were also some glitches to work out with the equipment, some of which didn't always integrate well with other pieces of technology. "I was reading manuals all the time and calling on tech support for help," said Gresser. "Once those initial issues were ironed out, it was smooth sailing."

The digital cameras have proved to be particularly useful in the classroom, according to Gresser, who used them during a recent English lesson on nouns. "Instead of just handing out worksheets on 'person, place, or thing,'" she explained, "my students went around school taking pictures, which were then used to develop a five-slide PowerPoint presentation on nouns."

Gresser also uses the technology for daily tasks, like the "digital lunch count." This allows students to manipulate pictures of themselves and select their lunch choices for the day without the need for a manual counting system. "We start using technology first thing every morning," said Gresser, "beginning with lunch sign-up."

The digital classroom makeover has not only energized students and teachers, but has also motivated senior staff to allocate funds to continue the project into other classrooms, according to Gresser. Anecdotally, Superstition Springs Elementary has also seen improved technology literacy among the students, enhanced student attention during class, and better reading and math comprehension, according to Gresser.

"This is my eleventh year teaching first grade, and I really feel that this is the most prepared class I've ever had moving onto the second grade," said Gresser, who frequently reviews her students' reading and writing progress. "There are still a few bumps to work out, but overall my students are doing fabulous in these areas. I credit the new learning environment with helping to make that happen."

[« previous](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[next »](#)