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StarrMatica fueling technology-aided instruction

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Nathan Wear, principal of Pence Elementary in Fairfield, uses a StarrMatica program on a Mimio interactive whiteboard. Mimio sells technology bars, seen top left, that convert normal whiteboards into interactive whiteboards. Photo Submitted

Hold on tight to your erasers. Elementary school probably isn't how you remember it. The days of chalk and blackboards, or markers and plain old whiteboards for that matter, are drifting away faster than your suppressed memories of that second-grade teacher scratching her fingernails across the blackboard.

Enter the interactive whiteboard, which acts as a giant white touch board of

sorts and displays programs and lessons projected from a computer. Students and teachers then use their hands to manipulate the different pieces on the screen.

StarrMatica By The Numbers:

- 70
Subscribing schools
- 30
Iowa schools subscribing
- 43
Topic areas covered
- 570+
Interactive Adobe Flash programs
- 3,000+
Links to approved interactive content
- 88%
Percentage of teachers who would use the boards more often if they had pre-made programs

The problem? Although the boards are an impressive piece of technology, the educational programs that instructors can use to teach different concepts have an array of deficiencies that often limit the boards from reaching their full educational potential.

Enter StarrMatica Learning Systems LLC, whose teacher-designed interactive Adobe Flash programs for the boards are fast becoming the savior for teachers hoping to effectively use the technology in the classroom.

"It happens very often that I will go into a school and they have one whiteboard that is in the library that teachers can check out and use, but it isn't getting used," said Emily Starr, a former fourth-grade teacher and president and founder of Clinton-based StarrMatica.

That is until she goes into the classroom and shows teachers her Web site, which if subscribed to, gives teachers access to more than 570 interactive lessons, games and activities that can

help teach skills across 43 topic areas for students in third to sixth grade. Also included is a database of Web links to 3,000 additional approved programs.

"I get about 10 minutes into my presentation and they start turning and whispering to each other and smiling, because they know what is going on," Starr said. "Because it is like this weight has been lifted off their shoulder, and their life is about to be made much easier, and they see the potential."

Starr formed StarrMatica in 2005, hired a couple of programmers from Elance.com, and began creating the different educational programs on her site. She got the idea after seeing the problems teachers, including herself, were having properly using the technology.

Although many of the interactive whiteboards, Starr said, come with great software for teachers to build their own lessons, it can often be a time-consuming and frustrating experience if a teacher isn't the creative, tech-savvy type.

"So the initial frustration is, OK, they know how to turn on the board, but if they don't have time to create lessons and there is not a great place to find good online resources that are already out there to use, then there is not a lot you can do with the board without content," she said.

And there is a demand for her content.

According to the K-12 Technology Tools and Trends 2009 report by Simba Information, 88 percent of teachers said they would use the interactive whiteboards more often if they had programs provided to them.

Tina Breen, the technology integration specialist for the Fairfield Community School District, saw the initial struggles firsthand when the district purchased a couple of boards to be used for middle school math classes.

"I think the teachers could see where, OK, I could do this and make it work with the (whiteboards); it was just, it can be a little bit overwhelming at first when you see it the first time," Breen said. "And you have all these tools on the left side and it is like, where do I begin?"

After Starr shared her system a year ago with the district and it purchased a subscription to StarrMatica, Breen said there was a ton of excitement among teachers and students and the technology was well used. As a result, the district outfitted all 12 of its fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms with Mimio interactive whiteboards, renewed its subscription with Starr- Matica, and will be discussing taking it district-wide in the future.

"I have been in technology for, oh my goodness, how many years, at least 20, and I recognize that, wow, these are quality pieces that she has put together, and they all fit," Breen said. "So instead of us having to go out and search or trying to find something that really works for one classroom but the other classroom doesn't know about it, we have got it all right here in one Web site."

StarrMatica sells yearly subscriptions on a per-student basis, with the average cost for a school being around \$1,000. StarrMatica is being used in approximately 70 schools, 30 of them in Iowa, and is in 15 states. Starr's goal is to reach all 50 states, and her system has a couple of early advantages that might help her do that.

Some of the whiteboard companies have resources available through portals where teachers can upload programs they make, and some publishing companies are now offering limited resources, but StarrMatica has one big edge, besides having a vast quantity of programs: It meets state requirements. The programs can be searched by standards in all 50 states, to ensure that the programs meet the curriculum requirements set by each state.

"The content that she has for the math and reading, so much of it aligns well with our standards and benchmarks," Breen said. "An overwhelming amount aligns very nicely."

Kari Bosma, a teacher/librarian at Northeast Elementary School in Ankeny, used StarrMatica without the use of interactive whiteboards at Terrace Elementary School in Ankeny. The teachers use StarrMatica in nearly the same way; the only difference is that the content can't be manipulated by touching it on the screen. Bosma echoed Breen's sentiment about the curriculum and said the teachers took advantage of another feature that gives students a password and allows them and their parents to access the different activities and lessons at home.

"I heard of several kids that would go home and work on StarrMatica," Bosma said. "It was awesome, because they could further their learning at home - and they wanted to."

Both Bosma and Breen praised the database of Web links, and Breen stressed the quality of the content programs Starr created.

"For the past few years, we have kind of geared away from that kind of thing," said Breen of pre-made content. "We have just never really been the district that believes in that. But her content was good enough."

StarrMatica has a 100 percent renewal rate from schools that bought its service, and has formed partnerships with some of the interactive whiteboard manufacturers. Along with being chosen to be featured out of 300 providers as a recommended content provider for Smart Technologies ULC, the largest interactive whiteboard manufacturer, StarrMatica formed a bundling partnership with Mimio. Mimio sells a technology bar that converts normal whiteboards into interactive boards for \$749, a cheaper option for schools than buying full boards, which range in price from \$1,200 to \$2,000.

Despite StarrMatica's early head start, Starr said she knows her company needs to continue expanding, because competition isn't far behind. Starr was selected to present to a panel of investors at the 2009 Iowa Venture forum on Oct. 7, and said she is in discussions to obtain additional capital from a variety of investors. That money would go toward creating a company structure, and more important, expanding the available content.

Starr said she hopes to expand the content for all needs, including kindergarten through second grade, and even to move into the area of science and possibly Spanish. She said she is working with resellers in an effort to get StarrMatica sold right along with the interactive whiteboards.

"And that has been very encouraging. In going out and contacting those resellers, there aren't other products that they are representing software-wise and content-wise," Starr said. "StarrMatica is the only one that they have to pull out of their bags."

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