Technology's true believers

Two-day summit to help teachers integrate MyTools2Go

Laurie Clement, left, and Joe Sisco, both Google Certified Teachers, work on preparations for the second annual Integrated Technology Summit being held at St. Joseph's High School on Aug. 19-20.

(Windsor, Ontario, July 24, 2014) – It took only one reading assignment for Susan Wright and her Grade 3 students at St. Angela Catholic Elementary School to become true believers in the seemingly limitless educational possibilities that go with using MyTools2Go in their classroom.

"My students loved it," Wright said of the WECDSB's own branded and customized version of Google Apps for Education. "We created a digitally collaborative environment that addressed everyone's needs and effectively moved thinking forward. It was an incredible experience."

A user-friendly, education management system, MyTools2Go allows teachers to create web-based documents, spreadsheets, Power Point presentations, and drawings, all of which can be stored in the cloud and shared with students and other teachers. It allows teachers to

collaborate with students online and provide them with instant feedback on their work as it progresses.

Last year, Wright attended the first annual Integrated Technology Summit, where she got two full days of instruction on how to use the program for everything from creating tools for assessment and evaluation, and engaging assignments.

Recognizing the positive effect digital learning has on student engagement, and classroom management, she started using it right away. Her first assignment required students to respond critically to a text shared in class and to digitally share their understandings of it based on the inferences they drew. Wright was able to share each creative response from individual student folders created in MyTools2Go, project them on the screen, and engage students in an open discussion focused on their observations, ideas, and questions.

"It created an opportunity for meaningful discussion, and almost immediately, reflective conversations started happening," she said. "It was amazing."

Before long, she was using the system for all of her curriculum.

"The students all have an e-portfolio for each area of the curriculum," she explained. "Everything they create goes into the folder and they can share it with me, their parents, peers, and other teachers, both now and in the future."

In math, students were regularly paired up to solve problems together, working on their assignments on a computer or iPad. Students worked simultaneously on shared documents with separate digital devices.

"The partners shared their thinking strategies with one another as if working side by side," she said. "This encouraged more explicit math talk between partners as they were required to explain themselves clearly and concisely using math language and visual demonstrations."

As the year progressed, students began tweeting their questions and challenges with students and teachers in other schools, both locally and globally, using the class Twitter account.

Hearing about how Wright enthusiastically embraced the program is music to the ears of Laurie Clement and Joe Sisco, both Google Apps for Education certified trainers and teachers. Along with David Petro, they're co-chairs of this year's second annual **Integrated Technology Summit** being held at St. Joseph's High School on Aug. 19-20.

"The teachers we've worked with have this vigour, this real sense of renewal as a result of working with these tools," says Sisco, whose eyes light up when he talks about the possibilities of the technology. "It's an exciting time to be a teacher."

More than just learning how to use the technology, Clement says it's important to see the big picture of how that technology is transforming education and the role of teachers, who are no longer delivering information to passive receivers, but becoming facilitators and collaborators in their students' learning.

"It's not just the product," says Clement. "It's the process. Teachers need to be engaged with their students throughout the process of completing their work, and these applications give them the tools to do just that."

Last May, Clement used the technology to conduct a live hangout, or what she calls a "virtual field trip" where Grade 8 students in her class at St. Rose Catholic Elementary School got to speak in real time with an actual holocaust survivor.

"That's the stuff that makes it real for the students," she said. "How would that have happened before? It wouldn't have. There's no way I could have provided my students with that kind of experience on my own."

One of the program's greatest features is the instant, real-time feedback it provides, Sisco said. For instance, teachers can create self-marking quizzes and other assignments that provide them with critical information about their own efficacy, helping them determine whether students are adequately comprehending the curriculum, and allowing them to modify their teaching methods if they aren't.

"Teachers get real-time feedback about where the students are in their learning to better inform their instruction," says Sisco. "That's a huge component. That's real teaching."

Sisco and Clement both acknowledge there are some who find adapting to new technology "a bit scary," but say many teachers and students throughout the board are embracing the use of MyTools2Go. As of the end of June, there were already about 21,000 active users who had already created more than 34,000 files, Sisco said.

Attending the summit will help relieve some of those fears, Sisco added. There will be sessions for beginners, as well as those who are more advanced in their familiarity with the applications, and they'll be divided up for elementary and secondary level teachers.

"We're not just going to teach you how to use an iPad and then leave," adds Clement. "The technology is a tool, just like a pencil, and it's there to assist the learning process. We're providing teachers with some tools they can add to their own backpacks. Our teachers are doing great things in the classroom. Let's allow the technology to make it a little easier."

So far, there are about 125 teachers signed up for the summit, but it can accommodate up to 200. For more information, visit the summit's web site:

https://sites.google.com/a/mytools2go.ca/wecdsb_integrated_technology_summit/home