

*Solutions for Digital Learner-Centered Classrooms*

# Designing Teacher- Student Partnership Classrooms



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# Introduction

K–8 students in a suburban district have started their journey to becoming students as learning partners by joining the Special Ops project. Classroom teachers selected two students from each class to become Special Ops members. The goal of the program is to create groups of student leaders to support teaching and learning in the classroom using digital tools. The district instructional coach Tina and I co-taught the first full-day student session. Armed with a Chromebook and the classroom iPad, fifty-two third- through fifth-grade students kicked off the Special Ops project.

We created an action-packed day with very high expectations that all students would collaborate, think critically, and communicate online and offline as they created a variety of products to take back and share with their classmates and teachers. They played with their first Kahoot!, a web-based, fun, interactive formative assessment platform. After the game, partners created a new Kahoot! about a topic they were studying in the classroom.

Students learned what a backchannel was and joined the room created on TodaysMeet. A *backchannel* is an online chat environment. These students had no background with chatting online in this type of environment, but they jumped right in and really enjoyed the experience. Comments at the end of the day were: “I don’t want Special Ops time to end,” “Can we meet again tomorrow?” and “Next time we get together, can we bring our lunch, skip recess, and learn more?” Skip recess? Wow!

Next, we introduced three ways to make a movie using the iMovie app, Animoto app and website, and WeVideo website. The students grouped themselves based on the tool they wanted to try and created a short video to share with classmates. We did not do any direct instruction on the tools because the students didn't need any help. Each group just jumped in and got started; if students ran into problems, they went to another group for help. Some students went into the hallway to film, others needed materials from the classroom, and other groups scattered to take pictures. Every Special Ops member was engaged and creating.

Screencasting came next. Again, this concept was new to every student. *Screencasting* is when an app or a website captures what is on the screen while also recording narration. For example, one group created a screencast of multistep mathematics problems, recording all the steps required to solve the problems. The final product was a movie of the lesson. Most groups used the iPad and the app Educreations to complete the activity. Recording the narration was not easy because the room was rarely quiet with so many active learners; most groups went out to the hallway for recording.

Are these students experts in every detail of every app or website? No. None of us is an expert, because the technology tools are constantly changing. The students taught each other and collaborated in the true sense of the word. Not one student became frustrated, gave up, or misbehaved. The fifty-two students were engaged and eager to create products to take back and share with their peers and teachers; they had a mission, a deadline, and specific goals. They persevered in part because there was an expectation that they would teach what they learned to their classmates and teacher. For all students, that is a very authentic audience.

Some of the comments from the principal and the teachers were:

- “The Special Ops team members couldn't wait to get back to class and share what they learned.”

- “I’ve never seen this student so animated as she described everything she learned.”
- “One of my students went home and made three movies last night, and she promised she will teach me how to make one myself.”

The students said:

- “When can we get together again?”
- “This is the most fun I have ever had at school.”
- “Can we meet tomorrow? I don’t care that it is Saturday!”
- “I wish school was always this much fun!”
- “The next time we get together, can we bring our lunches so we can learn more?”
- “I’m going to teach my family how to do this tonight so I can practice before I teach my teacher and class tomorrow.”
- “I can’t wait to learn more when I go home. Mrs. O., will you be in the backchannel if we have questions?”

The parents said:

- “My son loved the entire day. This was the first day all year he couldn’t stop talking about what he learned.”
- “My son came home and independently set up a backchannel for the Special Ops, created a website for the group, and created a discussion board. I didn’t even know what a backchannel was, so he explained it to me. He went back to school and invited other members to the backchannel for a planning meeting the next day after school. He loved everything about the day. Thank you!”

## A Session With a Purpose

This session was not about the websites, apps, or hardware. Instead, it was the first step in the process of students and teachers becoming learning partners. The students are our experts when it comes to technology, and we started with this group to create a buzz and help teachers understand that even very young students can share their knowledge as partners in learning. Our ultimate goal is to build capacity for teaching and learning in digital-rich classrooms across the district for the entire learning community.

To get started on the process of students as learning partners, students did use technology tools including websites, apps, and hardware. However, we don't want the primary focus of our work to be on the technology tools. Instead, the emphasis needs to stay on teaching and learning using good instructional strategies, or pedagogy, and sometimes that includes using technology tools.

William M. Ferriter and Adam Garry (2010) write about this in their very practical book, *Teaching the iGeneration: 5 Easy Ways to Introduce Essential Skills With Web 2.0 Tools*:

This discovery—that learning depends on skills instead of tools—is one that many educators are struggling to make. Instead of recognizing that tomorrow's professions will require workers who are intellectually adept—able to identify bias, manage huge volumes of information, persuade, create, and adapt—teachers and district technology leaders wrongly believe that tomorrow's professions will require workers who know how to blog, use wikis, or create podcasts. As a result, schools sprint in new digital directions with little thought, spending thousands on technology before carefully defining the kinds of learning that they value most. The consequences are high-tech classrooms delivering meaningless, low-level instructional experiences. (p. 7)

Ferriter and Garry are right: it isn't about focusing on the technology tools. Instead, we need to focus on the higher-order thinking skills behind the use of the tools.

Technology tools that the Special Ops members used included:

- Kahoot! (<https://getkahoot.com>), an online game generator
- iMovie (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/imovie/id377298193?mt=8>), an app for the iPad or a computer program for the Mac to create movies
- WeVideo ([www.wevideo.com](http://www.wevideo.com)), an online video-editing environment
- Animoto (<https://animoto.com>), a website to create and share videos using various templates

## Technology Tools Meet Pedagogy

The preceding is just a list of technology tools. The tools will continually change. Instead of focusing on the tools alone, focus on rich instructional strategies (pedagogy), ranging from simply recalling knowledge to synthesizing information and making judgments. Our hope is that the students will go back and share the tools with their classmates and teachers. When the teachers join us for professional development, they can focus specifically on curriculum connections because they will already know how to use the tools.

For example, Kahoot! is a fun way to quickly gather formative assessment data and save that information for future reflection. The important instructional piece for the teacher and the student is the assessment data collected during the Kahooting process, as well as the immediate feedback after every question. The website (the tool) is used to set up the questions (the pedagogy), and students respond (the pedagogy) using any Internet-enabled device (the tool). The questions the teacher asks when creating the Kahoot! need to