

The first Irish Interactive Whiteboards Survey

By Simon Lewis

Introduction

From 7th to 11th July, 2008, a course was set up by Willie McTiernan in the Kilkenny Education Centre on using Interactive Whiteboards. It quickly filled up and 24 participants took part. As part of this course, teachers were encouraged to try out 5 types of Interactive Whiteboards without the disturbance of salespeople, bamboozling them. The idea was that teachers themselves were “thrown into the deep end” and given tasks that they would have to do in their classrooms. At the end of 5 days, where teachers had to design several lesson plans, they were asked to fill out a survey.

Interactive Whiteboards and Me

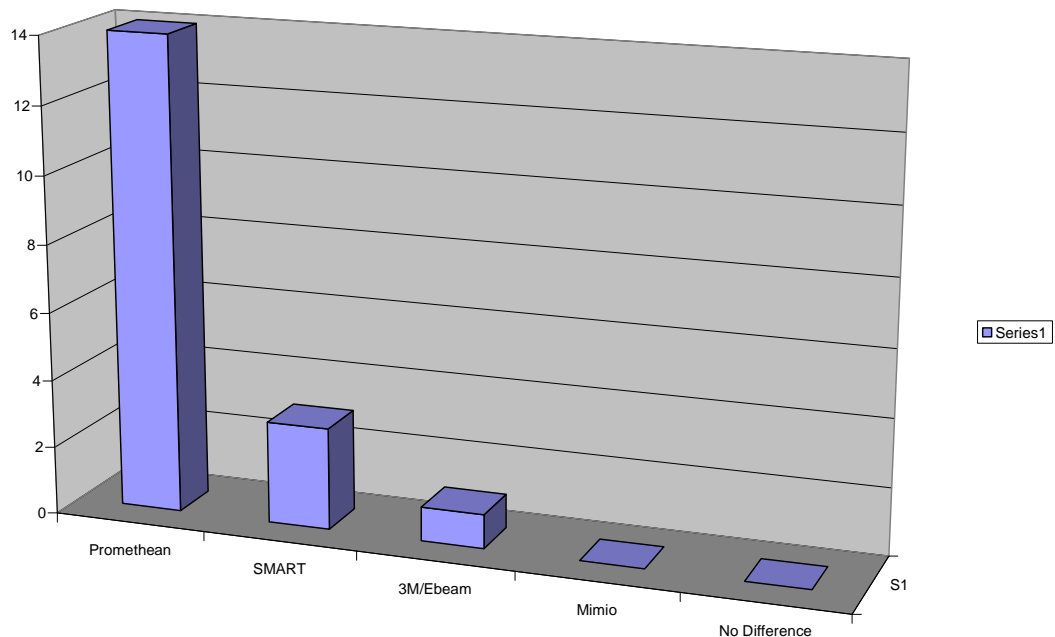
I have been a huge promoter of portable interactive whiteboards. I personally love the fact that my IWB can move with me whenever I want. I could not understand why schools would fork out sometimes over €5,000 for one Interactive Whiteboard when I could get two or three for the same price. I took on this course to investigate why this was as well as to create a forum for teachers to learn how to use their IWBs once they got them.

I add a small paragraph at the end of each question to illustrate what I have learned from the week and why I think teachers chose the answers they did. I have collated comments from the teachers on the course and am repeating them below.

This week has opened my eyes to what teachers, with no technical experience go through everyday when the “latest gadget” is put in front of them. I hope that this will be useful to the various companies who offer their solutions and useful for teachers who wish to go down the route of Interactive Whiteboards.

So on with the questions...

Q1. In general, which Interactive Whiteboard did you find the easiest to use?



It was clear that most primary school teacher found Promethean the easiest to use. Some comments from teachers included:

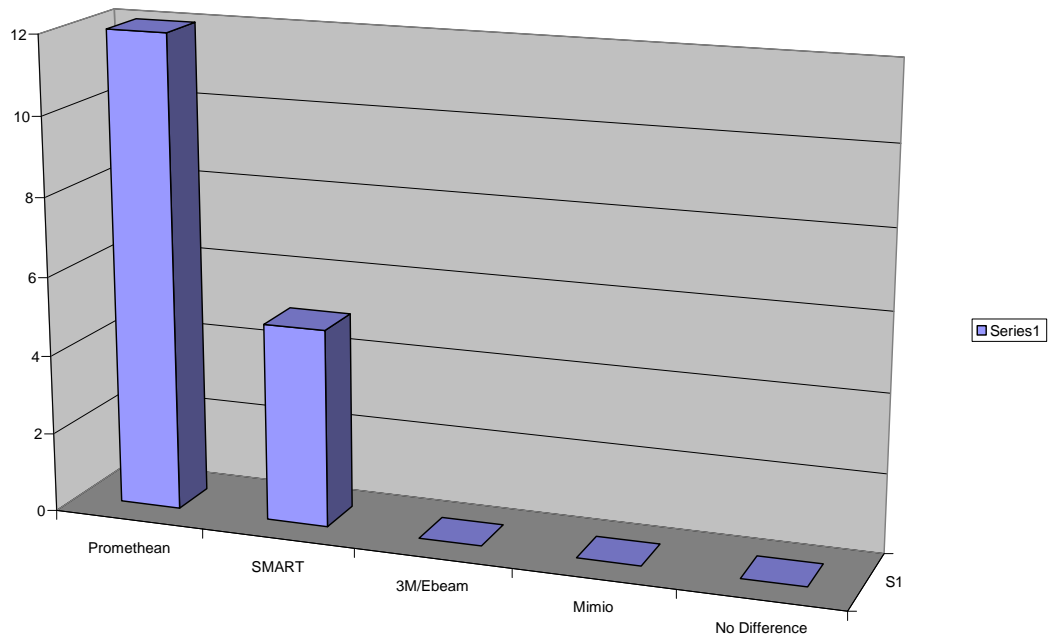
“Promethean has an edge - it does appear very user friendly.”

“I really felt that the Promethean whiteboard is more teacher friendly as the icons are cleaner.”

“Promethean definitely the best - it’s both teacher friendly and child friendly. It’s easy to use - wonderful resources and bright and colourful!”

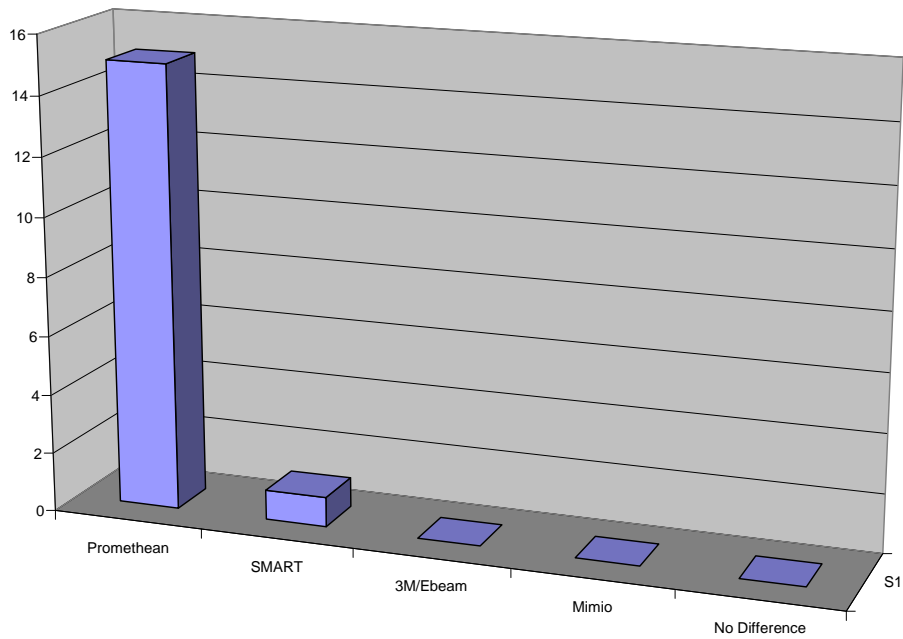
For me, I can see how Promethean IWBs have the edge. Their interface is colourful, big and cartoonish. The other boards blend in with the MS Windows look. Teachers were naturally attracted to this and were much more motivated to learn about the different things you could do on it. On other boards, they were not as eager to try it out. This follows the theory that first impressions account for over 55% of people’s judgements. Although many of the teachers conceded later in the week that the Promethean Whiteboard was quite restrictive, their minds had been made up previously.

Q2. Which handwriting recognition did you find easiest to use?



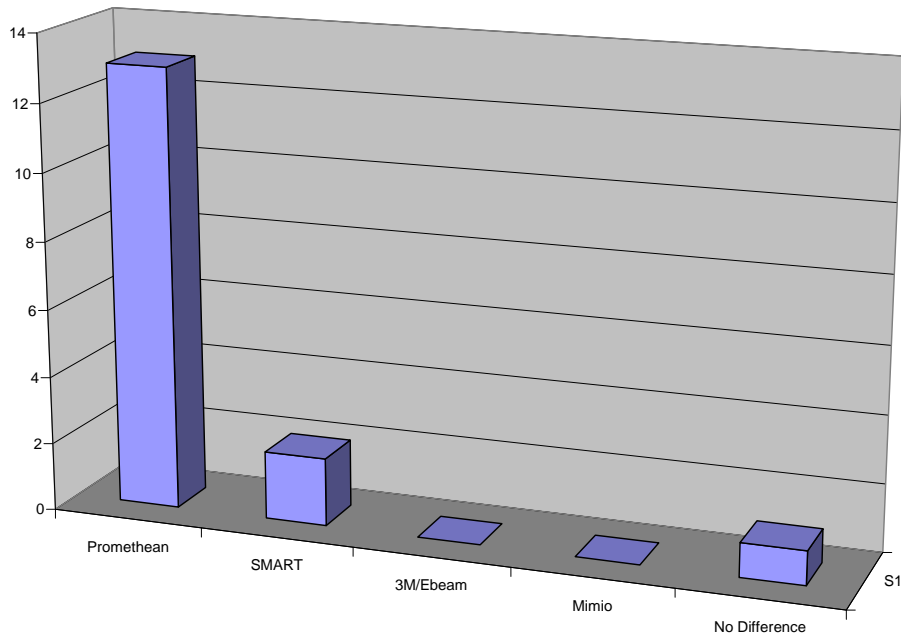
Promethean led the way here again. However, Smart was not too far behind. I was surprised that none of the others featured, especially the Mimio which sells itself on having the Parker Pen company behind them. For the record, I would have chosen either the Smart Board or Mimio as my favourites.

Q3. Which device seemed to be the most child-friendly?



Promethean were the clear winners here and I would agree this time. From the fact that they are height adjustable to the big, bold and bright colours, children would definitely favour the Promethean. I would recommend that the others create “skins” for their software.

Q4. Which IWB software did you find easiest to use?



Again Promethean were the clear winners and again it's the interface that does it for everyone. Even though you can use your finger on the Smart boards didn't seem to sway many - although it certainly swayed me!

Q5. Rate from 1 – 5 (1 = don't agree, 5 = agree), the importance of the following features:

Must be a permanent solution

Average: 2.87

Although 100% of participants agreed that they would prefer a permanent solution, (see question 7), they didn't see it as a very important factor. I will always claim that portable solutions are better because you always have the option of making them permanent by simply not moving them. With a permanent solution, it will stay where it is forever!

Must have handwriting recognition

Average: 4.17

Amazing this seems to be hugely important to most people. Perhaps it's the novelty factor or maybe teachers do see a use to it. However, I know I gave up on it after a week!

Must integrate with all external software

Average: 4.33

This was hailed as hugely important too. I thought this was interesting as Promethean make it very very difficult to interact with external software. For example, with an Ebeam or 3M solution, you can write all over a PowerPoint presentation and it allows you the option of saving your writing on that slide. Smart and Mimio integrate seamlessly with external programs, as do 3M and Ebeam. Promethean offer to import PowerPoint presentations but any external links, etc. are not imported.

Must have installed clip-art ***Average: 4.58***

This was seen as the most important factor. I can understand why. Why would you bother searching for hours on the Internet when you can simply type what you're looking for into a search box and a load of images appear? Simply drag and drop them onto the Flipchart/Scrapbook and that's it. I must admit, my mind was completely changed on this one. It was brilliant to get nearly anything I wanted on Smart and Promethean. However, whether it's worth an extra €2,000 is questionable.

Must have installed Flash games ***Average: 3.82***

I was surprised by how high this scored. I don't think this would sway me in any way as to whether I bought an IWB or not. However, I can see how nice they are!

Must have rulers, calculators and other useful accessories

Average: 4.58

This was also seen as most important. The rulers and other mathematical tools that Smart and Promethean offered really blew us away. One thing I liked about the Promethean ruler was that if you drew a line with it, you could really draw straight lines!

Must be wireless

Average: 3.53

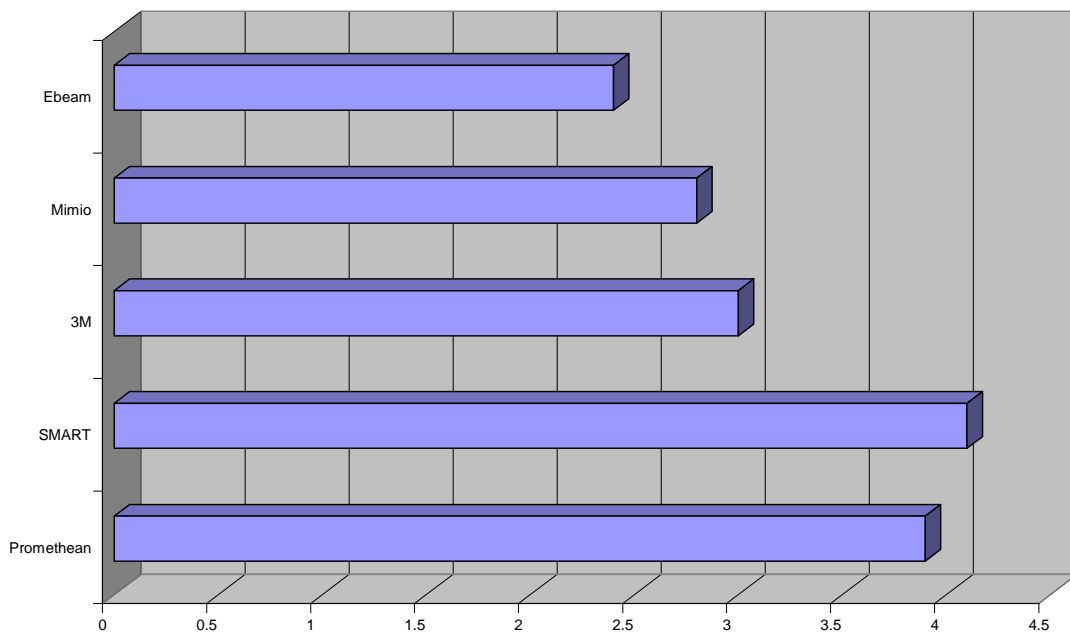
I was again surprised by how low this was. Perhaps it is because Promethean and Smart are wired systems and they are simply tucked neatly away. However, I would fully agree that portable solutions must be wireless as wires are a big health and safety issue. We sellotaped wires to the floor and covered them with mats and this helped but I see that this is not ideal.

If portable, the projector must be fixed to the ceiling

Average: 4.11

This was seen as important and I would agree. “Shadows are a huge issue”, a teacher commented and puts anyone off using a projector.

**Q6. Which Interactive Whiteboard is best value for money?
(Participants rated all IWBs from 1st to 5th. A 1st = 5 points, 2nd = 4 points, etc.)**



Smart boards edged out Promethean in this category. It was also interesting to note that all the permanent solutions scored higher than the portable solutions. Even though most participants preferred the Promethean board, they recognised that it is too expensive.

Question 7

Do you prefer a permanent or portable Interactive Whiteboard solution?

Permanent = 100%

Portable = 0%

Other Issues that affected teachers

The following are issues brought up by teachers.

Support and Backup

“Support and backup service from suppliers is a big issue.”

“Technical Support is essential.”

“Funding is essential from the Department of Education.”

Knowledge

“Most teachers are only aware of two types of board - Smart or Promethean. Also, after checking out cheaper versions, I feel schools are being somewhat scammed because many teachers, although enthusiastic about IT, lack the knowledge.”

Primary versus Secondary

“I chose Promethean as I’m teaching younger kids and felt it more child and teacher friendly. However I can see the advantages of Smart and Mimio for older classes and more technically able teachers.”

“Promethean is more beneficial for primary schools however Smart boards prove a most useful resource for second level.”

Conclusions

I found the week to be most interesting. From the very first day, teachers were naturally drawn to the Promethean and it stayed that way all week. It was rare to see teachers using the 3M, Ebeam or Mimio. In fact, a lot of teachers used the Desktop PCs in the room over these.

I deliberately gave teachers little instruction in using the Interactive Whiteboards to give them a sense of reality of what would happen in their own classrooms if one was unleashed upon them. I also found that the teachers latched on to people who had some experience of Interactive Whiteboards and learned from them.

Most teachers were very motivated to learn to use the Promethean and Smart boards and when anything went wrong, it didn’t put them off. However, I found that when teachers that used the other boards and something went wrong, they were not motivated to learn how to continue using them.

I would think that if the other Interactive Whiteboards looked more colourful and child-friendly that they would have competed better against the Promethean board. For companies, I would recommend that they get going on a bright, bold and colourful interface before teachers will be drawn to them. For teachers, it seems that Promethean is the most user-friendly, teacher-friendly and child-friendly option - but is it a case of beauty being only skin deep?