Blended Learning: The Invisible Platform Materializes

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An Interview with Becky Bordelon, M.Ed.,
Executive Director, Instruction and Learning, North America, Time To Know, Inc.

"There are many curriculum management systems that blend a curriculum with an assessment program and then generate reports on the effectiveness of that combination. At Time To Know, we do that, of course, but we do so much more," declares Becky Bordelon, Time To Know's senior executive in charge of instruction and learning in North America.

"We like to think of the digital teaching platform as being invisible, although the computer and the pieces and parts that go with it are not literally invisible. We want to have the computer regarded as a tool, a resource that empowers teachers so that they can manage instruction, learning, and assessment in their classrooms."

According to Ms. Bordelon, "The blended approach, which is not all about the computer, incorporates every strategy teachers would use in a regular program – and more." In a blended learning classroom, she says, "the kids do the work. Applets are open-ended exploration; the instruction sequence is completely provided for teachers, yet it's interruptible."

"Don't Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water"

"Teachers have too many resources," Ms. Bordelon asserts. "Teachers are resource-rich and results-poor. I believe this is so because teachers are provided with so many disjointed resources. They are given initial training so they can utilize these resources. They get excited about using the resources. Then they return to their schools and they can't figure out how to integrate resource A with resource B." The Time To Know platform, she says, "integrates those resources and then provides on-the-ground coaching to make sure teachers understand the program, can utilize it properly and maximize its benefits."

Time to Know, she claims, "has been able to build a platform in which the architecture can be interrupted. This attribute is unique to the
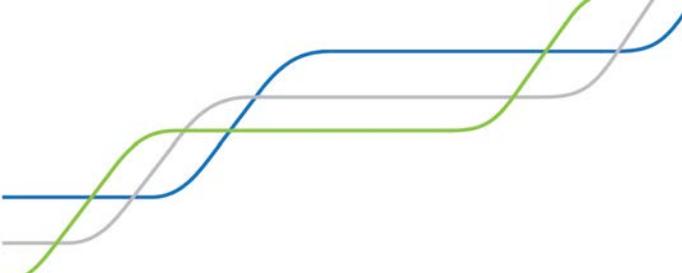
industry. There are some wonderful products out there, but they are off-the-shelf products. Time To Know offers a strong curriculum, continuous assessments and incisive reports. Importantly, though, we don't ask teachers to throw the baby out with the bath water."

Instead, she says, "we encourage teachers to bring their own best practices to the mix. We encourage them by advising them, 'Look at our lesson structure; look at what we are providing to you – but if you have a great website you'd like to add to what we offer or a classroom organizer that helps you teach a specific skill, insert it into the middle of this lesson.'

"The digital teaching platform (DTP) becomes the primary instructional environment for teachers. It marries the content, strategies for instruction and the tools and technology. The result is that when teachers open up their computer everything they need is at their fingertips."

Different Shades of Learning

An approach that accentuates different shades of learning is the cornerstone of the Time To Know blended learning digital classroom, Ms. Bordelon states. "How do you bring different activities, different levels and different abilities, learning styles and teaching styles into the classroom? It's an age-old question to which we may now have an answer," she declares. "We believe that we have provided a way for teachers to achieve blended learning by building it into our instructional sequences."

This approach, she insists, is not a sidelight, but in fact is the core of the system. "Within our lessons are differentiated learning activities. For example, she explains, a reading passage might be provided for students in multiple lexile levels. A lexile is a measurement of a passage's degree of reading difficulty. "The students can all be reading the same content but at a level that is appropriate for their reading ability."

In addition, she continues, "we also provide different learning levels in each of our lessons, which have remediation and acceleration activities built in. Our 'Prior
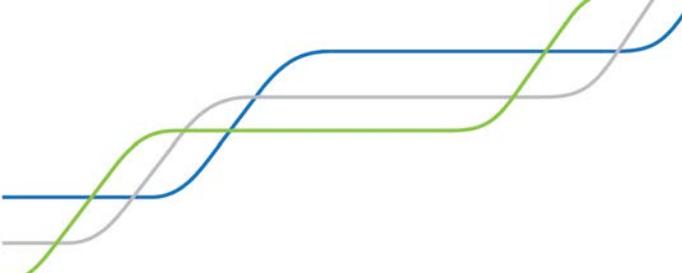
Knowledge' activity is designed to provide a student with the knowledge base necessary to address a specific lesson. If we have one or two or 10 children in the class who need access to that activity, the teacher can assign it to those individual students. The rest of the children in the class might not have that activity assigned to them."

Acceleration activities are available for those students able to move ahead at a faster pace. "These activities are not just more practice for advanced students," she explains; "these students are actually practicing at a different level."

"Because our architecture is interruptible, we don't have to take each lesson in sequence. Let's say that yesterday's lesson had a component that the teacher believes Betty and Susie need to review again. The teacher can pull that piece into today's lesson and assign it to as many other students as needed."

Yes, It's Designed for Children with Disabilities

Time To Know's blended learning system is designed with differentiated components to accommodate children with disabilities, Ms. Bordelon notes. "We have the ability to utilize narration throughout our entire program. The program can be read to students, should the teacher choose."


The system's highlighted text feature, she explains, enables words or sentences to be highlighted for students as the text is read. "We provide immediate feedback for kids based on how they answered a specific question."

In addition to real-time class monitoring, Time To Know offers a feature called Practice and Learn (PAL). PAL, she explains, "is an adaptive learning feature where the children take a quiz or an assessment that emphasizes a skills focus." Children who answer questions incorrectly are branched by PAL to lower-level activities. As these students begin to answer the questions correctly PAL advances them. Teachers also have access to the PAL component. "

The Teacher as Indispensable Facilitator

With Time To Know's software appearing to bear so much of the teaching load, will the traditional classroom teacher continue to be necessary? Ms. Bordelon, a
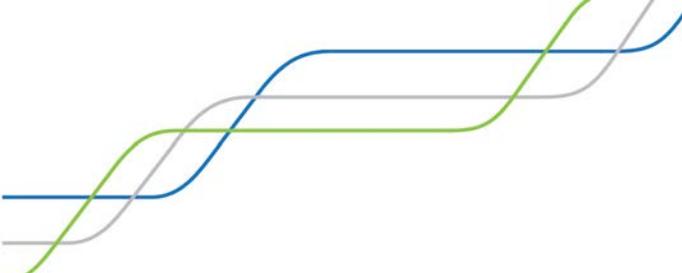
longtime classroom teacher, has sensed teachers' initial concern and appreciates it.

Most teachers who are concerned for their futures in a Time To Know blended learning system have not yet been directly exposed to that system, she insists. "Once teachers spend even 10 minutes on the Time to Know program, that concern melts away. The truth is, we view the teacher as the indispensable facilitator.

"This program cannot run on its own. It's not like a program where a child goes into a lab, logs on and something automatically happens." In fact, she adds, "the only part of our program that has that adaptive learning component is our PAL. Every other component is teacher-guided; the teacher makes the decision and opens up the activities for the students. The students can't even access the various activities unless those activities are opened up for them by the teacher."

For her part, she declares, "I would have loved to have had this system in my special education classroom. Many of my students had learning disabilities, some of which were very severe. But anyone who has worked in education for long knows that it's often about dysteachia, not just dyslearnia."

"Students Are Rewarded for Success"

"In this program, students are rewarded for success," Ms. Bordelon states. "Students don't have to say, 'I don't know how to read this word' because a word can be pronounced over and over again for them, if needed. Students can move at their own pace. The program supports students' learning needs and allows them to maintain their self-esteem while they are catching up with and accelerating their learning."

As an example of the system's effectiveness with special education students she cites a recent experience in a Time To Know special education classroom. "One of our teachers has two fourth grade students who were considered profoundly disabled. These two kids had never been successful. They'd always been disruptive. When the teacher first learned these students were going to be in her class she was very worried. But there they were – and there we were with Time To Know.

"I visited her classroom about three weeks into the program. The teacher met me at
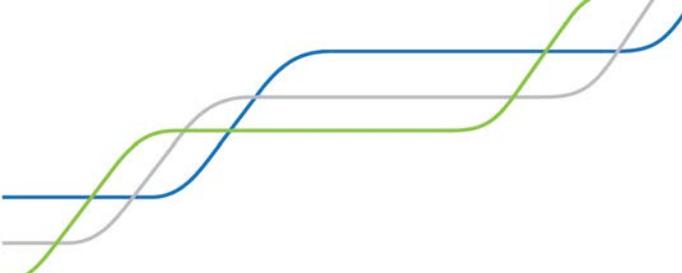
the door. I told her I was very interested to find out about all of her students, but especially those two. I asked her if she would identify them for me so that I could observe them specifically. She refused. 'You find them,' she told me, but I couldn't. At the end of class she and I talked about them. The discipline issues associated with the two kids in question had simply evaporated. The two were engaged. They were motivated. They were excited."

The Time To Know blended learning program, she says, has proven its effectiveness in inclusive and special education classrooms. "Some of our classrooms are inclusion."

In New York, Ms. Bordelon explains, Time To Know is being employed in CTT (collaborative team teaching) classes comprised mainly of general education students but also including students requiring some services from the school, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, counseling and speech therapy. CTT classes are staffed by two fully certified teachers, one with special education training, the other with a general education focus.

Bridging the Gap between Conceptual Teaching and Application to Testing

According to Ms. Bordelon, the Time To Know program has managed to bridge a teaching gap that has bedeviled teachers since the introduction of high-stakes testing: how to prepare for testing without teaching to the test? I believe we do a very good job of preparing kids without the test being the major focus.

"In a couple of ways we have been able to bridge that gap between conceptual teaching and application to testing," she claims. "We achieve this implicitly and explicitly: implicitly through constant formative assessment; every activity item is assessed, and teachers can find out how their students are performing; every question students respond to is tracked and teachers can learn whether children got the answer right on the first try, on the second try, or if they had to go to the 'show-me' answer. There's no guessing for teachers."

"We have built into the program summative assessment that is explicitly taught; it mirrors the state testing exactly because we know that that is what students will be held accountable to.
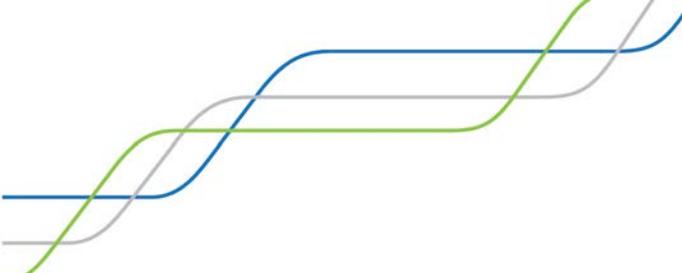
"We've even built in a component that directly teaches test-taking strategies. Teachers can go through that and 'get it over with' – make sure that pupils know how to take a test, and then move on to the real teaching.

"Testing is a make-it-or-break-it for teachers, all of whom are in a continuous state of worry about these tests. With this system they can relax a little knowing that every minute of the day they can pinpoint their students' progress and the areas where students need improvement. Then teachers can make those instructional decisions to ensure that their students are prepared."

Non-Stop Program Assessment

The efficacy of the program's components and its overall effectiveness are also the subject of non-stop assessment, Ms. Bordelon notes.

"We do short-term internal assessments with great frequency. We measure against district benchmarking because we know that we have to hold ourselves accountable to exactly that for which the teachers are held accountable: state assessments. Therefore, all of our results are based on those year-end state assessments. Our results have been very, very good. We saw improvement last year in all areas, with significant improvement in math, reading and writing.

"In addition, we decided that it was very important to engage third-party vendors to work with us, to perform some evaluations that were completely objective. We started this evaluation process with our work in Israel, where we began conducting some third-party evaluations that continue to this day.

"We did our initial Texas evaluation this year. We're continuing that evaluation in Texas in the Grand Prairie school district. We're conducting an internal evaluation this year that is very formalized and includes control groups. We're doing all the qualitative and quantitative measurements and are handling interviews and class observations as well as assessments."

The continuous assessments are paying off, she notes. "I was most excited about our class profile results. In New York City, students are rated as a 1,2,3 or 4. In Texas, it's a three-scale rating. We analyzed the class profile of our control groups as well as our Time To Know classes and looked at how many students we had been able to move
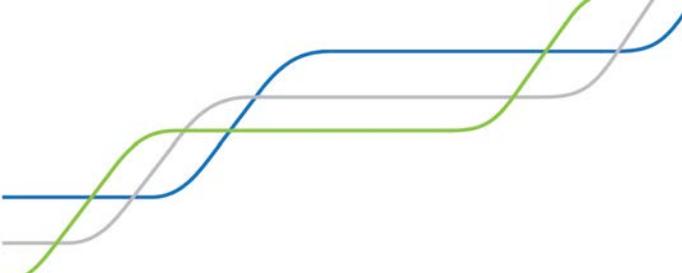
out of level 1 and into level 3 in Texas, which is the equivalent of level 4 in New York."

Before Time To Know was implemented we were told that schools were having success moving students from the lower to middle levels but less success in moving them from the middle levels to the top levels – level 4 in New York and level three, the 'commended' level, in Texas."

After Time To Know was implemented, however, "we looked at those class profiles and saw huge movements of students. We had many fewer students in the lower levels, a good majority of the kids in the middle levels, but big increases in the movement of students into the upper levels.

"I talked to the principals about their findings. They told me that based on the testing results teachers were evidencing a clear preference for future assignments to Time To Know classes."

"Any Teacher Can Do It"

In Ms. Bordelon's opinion, any classroom teacher can be taught, and can be effective with, the Time To Know digital teaching platform. Coaching, she points out, is a major reason for her optimism. Classroom teachers who are introduced to the Time To Know program are assigned a "coach" who guides them through the process.

"All of our coaches have been successful teachers. Not only were they successful overall but they were successful with struggling students. That is very important to us. Prior to coming to us many had moved out of the classroom and were providing special development within their school districts. A couple of them had some administrative experience as well. These are individuals who can empathize with the teachers they are coaching, and vice versa. "

While she is enthusiastic about the program's value and the ability of her coaches to coax teachers, especially those with minimum previous exposure to educational technology, through the system, she concedes that all teachers may not initially
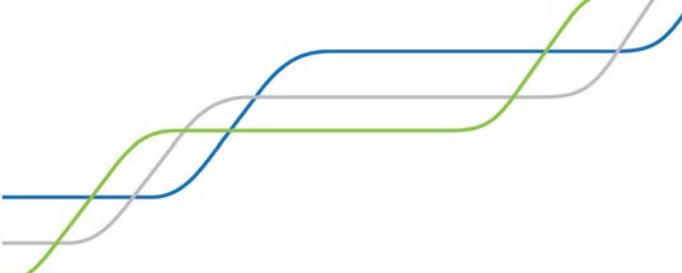
share her enthusiasm.

"There are always teachers, as in any profession, who will be resistant. They'll be afraid. But as soon as we show them what's in it for them, how this will make their lives easier, how they are going to have access to tools that will provide them with the materials they need, their fear begins to melt away."

She emphasizes to teachers that the Time To Know agenda does not include replacement of the human teaching function. "We let them know from the get-go that we value their ideas and their support."

In fact, she points out, many of the changes that have been made to the Time To Know program are derived from teacher feedback from the field. "Last year we had a teacher who'd been teaching for 32 years. She came to our initial professional learning with arms folded and the attitude to go with that gesture. The attitude said, "I'm going to endure this and then I'm going to go back to doing what I do best. She turned out to be one of our biggest fans. We tell our participating teachers that they can – and should – continue to do what they believe is right for their students. They can wrap those strategies into the Time To Know program, which values teacher judgment."

Fear Strikes Out

For those teachers who are frightened of learning the program, she explains, "we take it step by step by step by step. We have 90-second instructional tutorials for them to utilize if, for example, they forget how to turn their computer on, or how to build a class."

She admits that for many teachers buying into the Time To Know program requires them to leap from a standing start into the deep end of the 21st century ed tech world. "I've been in the educational technology industry for 15 years. I've seen a huge change, yet we still have a few teachers who are hard-core resisters -- but it's changing."

As an example, she points to "a delightful teacher in New York who admitted he was scared to death. He said, 'I don't know how to turn a computer on.' After the third day of working with him I encountered him in the hallway. He hugged me and said,
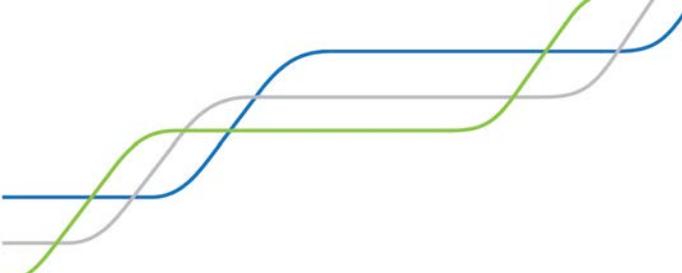
'I'm going to join the 21st century and I thank you for giving me the opportunity to do that.' The point is that many teachers are delighted that someone is willing to take the time to work with them and show them the ropes and to alleviate their fears."

She and her coaches make sure from the beginning to reiterate to teachers the Time To Know mantra. "We tell them that the program is not about teacher evaluation, it's about providing teachers support."

Future Expansion: Will the Infrastructure Be There?

The expansion of Time To Know is on Becky Bordelon's mind. "Our eventual plan is to expand to grades 3-8, and then, perhaps, to high school. Our goal, in addition to our current focus on English and language arts (ELA) and mathematics, is to move into science and also have our program available in non-English languages.
"We're looking to provide home access to Time To Know on a widespread scale. This will move ahead as computer technology evolves. We also want to expand our reporting capabilities so that our teachers and administrators have even more access and support."

One of the challenges of expanding Time To Know, she points out, "is finding school and district administrators who have the vision to take their classrooms into the 21st Century with a 1:1 implementation. A change in the teaching and learning environment requires support from the district, campus and classroom levels in order to be successful. Another challenge with taking Time To Know nationwide is aligning the curriculum to the standards taught within different states. We are already addressing this challenge by aligning our curricular development to the recently released Common Core Standards. Additionally we need to be able to provide support to teachers in a more virtual way in order to continue to support them as we expand."

Despite the obvious infrastructure challenges that lie ahead, Ms. Bordelon is undaunted. "I do not think it will take long at all for the infrastructure to exist. I have a magazine on my desk at home with an article about allowing kids to bring their cellphones, their iPads, their own tech tools, to the classroom. This is ironic because a colleague of mine and I just last year were visiting a district in Texas where the administrators made the tough decision to permit students to bring cellphones to school for classroom use. The district took a lot of heat but now other districts are
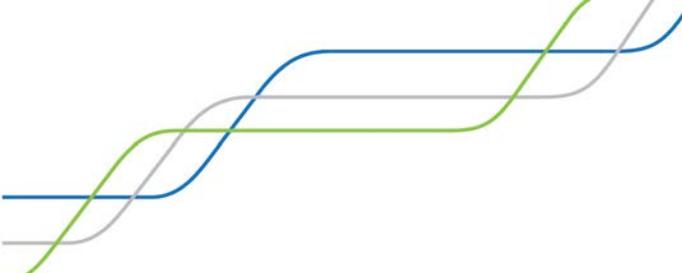
approaching those district leaders to seek their advice about making the system work elsewhere.

"This is a revolution, not just evolution. We have to be prepared for the revolution. I think an open mind is the best way to prepare. Don't say, 'We've never done it that way before,' or ask, 'What might those kids do on those cellphones phones or iPads?' The better question is, 'What can kids do?' After all, look what they've already done with those tools on their own outside of school! Thanks to their technology they are learning without help and if we don't catch up with them we adults, teachers, are the ones who will be left in the lurch."