

Ready to Launch

Portal delivery software from ClassLink offers customized academic information from any computer.

\\ BY AMY ROGERS NAZAROV

PORTAL DELIVERY SOFTWARE is helping teachers gain precious in-class teaching time, giving students easy access to missed lessons or group projects from home, and wringing new life from old hardware.

Products from manufacturers such as ClassLink use a server-centric strategy to give teachers and students at all levels, elementary through high school, a view of school data and learning resources specific to their needs.

ClassLink's LaunchPad lets schools create a custom view of a

set of applications and files required for a given class's or grade's academic needs. Students can use a range of devices in the classroom, from netbooks to late-model notebooks or even older desktops, to view the information to which they have been designated access by IT.

Teachers get a comprehensive view of information resources, plus the ability to intervene when a student is having trouble with an application. ClassLink also lets IT, school officials and others see the value of an app in terms of who uses it and

how often — information that might be useful when the time comes to upgrade or change a product.

Because LaunchPad allows a student to tap into classroom resources from any computer, physical presence in the classroom is no longer a prerequisite for him or her to use a certain book, image or file.

"I can now assign the types of things for use out of class that I could not have assigned before," says Tony Nassivera, who teaches 11th-grade American history and 12th-grade economics at Hudson Falls High School in New York. "It used to be that my students would go home and take notes from a textbook. Now they can create an online web of notes — using a product like Inspiration — and use or add to them anywhere."

Greg Partch is the director of information technology at Hudson Falls School District. A former science teacher and school business manager, Partch has one eye on the bottom line even as he assesses technology products that can truly enhance learning.

Nearly 10 years ago, when the district first rolled out its system, it wasn't so much the thin client that drove the district's interest, but rather the application portal delivery system. Partch says ClassLink reminded him of a corporation he worked for in the 1980s whose sales force used Citrix thin-client software to log into a centralized application from any location. "ClassLink has taken that and tweaked it specifically for education," he explains.

The savings on hardware and maintenance — and more

Portal Delivery TIPS

Here are some best practices for deploying ClassLink:

A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY. A one-to-one implementation is not necessary for a successful portal delivery solution, educators say. Given 10 thin clients in a 20-student classroom, half the students can be taking part in an activity on the computer and the other half off, as happens in some of the classes taught by Tony Nassivera, who teaches 11th-grade American history and 12th-grade economics at Hudson Falls High School in New York. After a designated time period, students switch places.

GET A COUNT OF HOME PCs. Monroe, Conn., enjoys a 90 percent penetration rate of computers in students' homes, notes Craig Tunks, director of technology for the public schools, police department and public library. Not all schools or districts can boast a number that high, so consider partnerships with public libraries or recreation centers that would give students another means to access ClassLink through shared computers.

ASK THE KIDS. Pete Baccile, technology director at Hornell City School District in New York, says his staff runs focus groups with students and teachers every few weeks to see what hurdles and successes they are encountering in the pilot.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT ALWAYS FIT ALL. Certain applications — such as those required for high school engineering classes or others that require heavy computational power — may not run in a thin-client environment. Preserving some PCs for these applications is prudent.

important, students' ease of access to educational materials from anywhere — have made the combination of thin clients with portal delivery software a no-brainer.

Management Buy-In

Jeff Orr, senior analyst for mobile devices at ABI Research, says deploying thin clients and portal delivery in the classroom requires support from top management at the school and the district. The project must also meet basic technology requirements.

"There must be a way to authenticate users and confirm their access to the data they are allowed to use," he says. "And there must be a way to decide where a curriculum or document [or other learning resource] resides."

Pete Baccile, technology director at Hornell City School District in New York, says when the district's 2,000 students connect to ClassLink via a netbook, they enter a fully secure network.

"We experienced some push-back at first because students wanted to be able to customize the

desktop," says Partch. But, like the network itself, the client machines are locked down to prevent students from modifying them, which would pose just the maintenance headache the whole system is designed to obviate. Now, he adds, "the kids love it."

As for the teachers, "they thought that they had to have control over all the PCs in their classrooms." But when every computer is just like the one next to it, and many or most are thin clients with very specific pre-configured access, the control issue is moot.

In the town of Monroe, Conn., where Craig Tunks is director of technology for the public schools, police department and public library, a ClassLink deployment required a shift in mind-set for those doing the teaching and learning.

The kids were excited when they first used ClassLink, says Tunks, but teachers were reluctant to give up the way they had been using computers in the classroom. Yet students' quick mastery of ClassLink served as leverage. Their embrace

"was key as we began to say to the teachers, 'Let's rethink how we are providing instruction.'"

As the time required to use a resource in class shrinks, teachers are thinking differently about how they spend their allotted minutes. Many, such as Nassivera, say that more hands-on instruction and greater efficiency is now possible.

Support Benefits

Hornell City's Baccile says his technicians were very concerned about how they would manage such an environment without more personnel, and leery of supporting hundreds of students in the one-to-one Acer Aspire One netbook deployment Hornell CSD embarked on in 2009.

Yet running ClassLink in tandem with the netbooks has greatly simplified support, especially because Hornell opted to partner with ClassLink to handle home-user support. An added plus: Problems hampering a given client machine can usually be solved by IT on any floor, in any building.

The technology has also simplified upgrading. Across Partch's district, there are now about 1,800 thin clients running ClassLink software in Hudson Falls classrooms. When a new application is requested and approved, "we build one server that is squeaky-clean and replicate it over 11 more servers," he says. "It takes us 30 minutes to deploy the app out to 1,800 clients."

Tunks says in Monroe there are three thin-client workstations in each classroom for student use, plus a standard desktop for the instructor.

At the end of the day, thin clients coupled with portal delivery products won't necessarily make kids smarter. But they can create more comprehensive learning environments for students, as well as more constructive classroom hours for teachers. And that's surely where technology's role in enhancing education lives up to its promise. ■

Greg Partch of Hudson Falls School District appreciates the mobility and cost-savings benefits of thin clients.

32% of children ages 13 to 17 cited education and schoolwork as the primary reason for increased use of the Internet.

SOURCE: Grunwald Associates