In the 1840s, school reformers fretted that teachers were making scant use of an incredible new instructional technology. The chalkboard had been introduced into the nation’s emerging common schools a decade or two earlier, but classroom visits revealed little if any use. It seemed that the students knew how to use the device better than the teachers did. To prepare teachers to take advantage of this innovative technology, normal schools (early teacher training colleges) introduced courses on chalkboard use. Textbooks to support those courses were written, early forms of professional development were instituted, and how-to guides created. Why were chalkboards, eventually such a natural part of the classroom routine, so difficult to embrace?

When we think about the elements that make today’s instructional technology devices—computers, interactive whiteboards, handhelds, and so on—complex, we tend to dwell on technical issues. How do I connect to the Internet? Will I break it if I press this button? What does Exit mean? How do I turn it off? How do I turn it on? Early chalkboard users may have confronted questions about best use. Is it better to use block letters or cursive? How much detail should I write? Should I put all my notes on the board or just the most important ones? What happens when I turn my back on the students? But the device itself couldn’t have been that complicated to use technically. Touch a piece of chalk to the board, move it around, and you’re on your way. Simple, right? So why didn’t teachers use them?

The reformers who introduced chalkboards to the country’s emerging common schools drew their inspiration from what they had witnessed in university teaching. There they saw college professors dynamically illustrating their lectures on large pieces of slate, bringing their words to life with timely illustrations and notes matched perfectly to their unfolding lessons. Such instructional dynamism clearly also should be in the hands of teachers working with younger children. However, the one-room schoolhouses that dominated early 19th century American common education weren’t structured to match that pedagogical vision. A one-room schoolhouse
of the time could easily require a teacher to manage groups of children, sometimes numbering 100 or more, of all ages and abilities, covering all subjects, at once. Rarely, under those circumstances, did a teacher teach everyone at the same time. Instead, teachers relied on recitations and a monitorial system that might today be called peer-assisted drill and practice.

At the time, the chalkboard offered a much more active and engaging classroom experience than the dominant norm. But the way teachers taught and the context in which that teaching happened both had to change for the chalkboard promise to be realized. The technical part of learning to use the chalkboard was easy; the challenge came with the pedagogical demands accompanying it.

The shift from lumping all children together in a one room schoolhouse to separating those children into grades by age had a huge impact on the form of classroom teaching. With the change in structure, the vision of dynamic, teacher-led (and chalkboard-fed) instruction could now match a school infrastructure that placed kids of similar ages and abilities together. The chalkboard, once thought to be too complicated for teachers, quickly became an essential tool of the trade, and one, some might argue, that rarely reached its inspirational potential over the last 150 years. In fact, today’s critics of the educational norm might see the entrenched chalkboard as emblematic of a dominant chalk-and-talk pedagogy that neglects student interests and capabilities and blocks deep, self-constructed understanding.

Hopefully this history lesson on the chalkboard can offer some insight into current technological innovations in K-12 schooling. The digital devices of the past few decades have certainly posed technical hurdles for teachers, but, like chalkboards, the bigger obstacles to acceptance may well be pedagogical. The promise of 21st century educational technologies once again threatens the instructional norm. What does it mean to reach toward the promise associated with computers and the Internet within the current structure of K-12 schooling?

In this book, Catherine Schifter captures the stories within a system that grappled with that question. As you read about the people and processes, I urge you to look beyond the technology itself. The tales in the pages ahead are not about databases, simulations, webquests, and educational productivity tools. They are about change. And lessons learned about change live long after the technology has faded.

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