

*A Tidebreak Case Study: San Jose State University Incubator Classroom*

## **BRINGING STUDENTS “BACK INTO THE CONVERSATION”**

“*The (Incubator) Classroom enables professors to experiment with flexible learning environments and technology tools selected to enhance faculty-student interaction, encourage active learning, and increase student involvement. Faculty and students can utilize a variety of technologies focused on collaboration ... and transforming the learning experience.*”

*– San Jose State University website*

### **San Jose State University**

Students: 32,746  
Faculty: 1,853  
Customer since: 2007

San Jose State University’s award-winning Incubator Classroom is a cornerstone of a 10,000 square foot Academic Success Center designed to fulfill part of the University’s “Vision 2010” initiative. Leaders at the University wanted to provide learning spaces that engaged students – many of whom spent only a few minutes on campus beyond class time – by helping them to connect with each other during class. Tidebreak’s ClassSpot is the central collaborative software infrastructure that tied together multiple technologies in the space to facilitate in-class participation; it was a critical ingredient that ensured the success of the classroom project.

### **ClassSpot “Scaffolds” Participation at Many Levels**

ClassSpot had an immediate impact, presenting faculty and students with intuitive interfaces that they could easily master. The software made it easy to share content and collaboratively combine information as part of class sessions. As they became more familiar

with ClassSpot and began to imagine more sophisticated ways of working together, faculty and students were able to tap added layers of capability to match their evolving needs. Mr. Menko Johnson, an Instructional Designer at SJSU who managed the Incubator Classroom, noted that ClassSpot's unique design allows different levels of participation that are critical to success in an interactive classroom. "ClassSpot flexes with faculty as they try new things and add new layers to their teaching approach. At a basic level it is a tool to manage content across multiple screens, but faculty can add student participation and ultimately connect the classroom with informal learning environments. I can't think of another program we have that moves in the same way."

*"ClassSpot is the tool that grows with you. It solves multiple problems in multiple ways."*

**MENKO JOHNSON**  
**INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER**

### **A "Swiss-Army Knife" for Multi-Screen Environments**

ClassSpot quickly demonstrated its versatility as a tool for helping faculty manage content and applications across the Incubator Classroom's three-display environment (which includes two SMARTBoard display systems). Faculty are able to interact across three independent computers driving the display screens by simply moving a cursor from side to side as if the three screens are one extra-wide desktop. This allows faculty to keep multiple applications "active" at a time and to assign each screen a distinct purpose as appropriate to class activities. Some or all of the screens can be shared with students to support interactive discussion, though the faculty member can always "lock out" the students to retain direct control of what is being shown to the class. "ClassSpot solves so many infrastructure-related problems for multi-screen environments. It's hard to underestimate the value of that," says Johnson.

### **Comparative Literature Class Hones Digital Researching Skills**

Dr. Katherine Harris's graduate-level Romantic Era Literature course uses ClassSpot as a "constant conversation" tool that allows students and faculty to bring relevant information into their discussions with a flick of a mouse. In one exercise, the class uses ClassSpot and Google Docs to bring relevant information into their discussion of literary works. Students create a document on the center screen to create a basic timeline that spans the Romantic era of literature. They then search online repositories to find historical events, artistic works, contemporary writings, and biographical information that might have influenced the author. As they find items of interest, students send the information to one of the interactive screens to the side of the center display. Once publicly available, other members of the class can review and discuss each "find" to determine whether it would be relevant to their analysis. If so, someone from the class will place a reference and/or link to the material into the timeline document.

Students use the side screens to type questions about a work as they discuss it in class, and often show their own work on the large screens for critique. Johnson notes that ClassSpot "opens up multiple communication pathways that faculty can fit to how they want students to use information. It creates greater opportunities for students to rapidly introduce digital works to support speculation, discussion, and comparison."

### **Student Teams “Socially Collaborate” to Solve Statistics Problems in Class**

In an undergraduate Kinesiology course on measurement and evaluation, Dr. Bethany Shifflett begins class building students’ knowledge in a public way by presenting information on the large screens. Students are able to absorb the presented material, ask questions while gesturing to particular areas of the screen, or dynamically interact with a calculation exercise to share their approach to its solution.

Dr. Shifflett often divides the class into three separate groups and has each group work collaboratively on a separate problem. Each of the groups uses one of the three large screens as its public information space and tablet PCs as personal workspaces. This creates an environment that is much different than having everyone in the class work individually on the same problem. The “social collaboration” amongst students in each group brings the process alive and creates opportunities for the students to compare and critique each other’s work in a collaborative atmosphere.

*“ClassSpot meets the faculty at their level. It is a faculty teaching and a student learning tool. Many products are not good at doing both, and this one is.”*

**MENKO JOHNSON**  
**INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNER**

### **Supporting a Diverse Collection of Courses**

The Incubator Classroom is used by a wide cross-section of courses from different disciplines, all taught by faculty who are interested in enriching students’ learning experience. Some of the courses that have been taught in the room include 20th Century Poetry, Introductory Physics, Urban Planning, and Global Business Leadership. Multiple seminar courses and even an elective literary magazine course have also used the classroom.

Students have grown accustomed to using ClassSpot in their courses, and faculty have begun building their instructional approaches in ways that rely on its capabilities. Johnson notes that once they’ve tried ClassSpot, faculty don’t want to go back to old-style teaching methods. “They would be irate if they didn’t have it now, if for any reason we yanked it back.”

The Incubator Classroom’s success inspired the Martin Luther King Jr. Library – a facility SJSU manages jointly with the City of San Jose – to install ClassSpot software in one of its newly renovated classroom facilities. “This new space makes ClassSpot available for use by SJSU students and residents of the city of San Jose serving K-20 and the community, greatly expanding the utilization and testing of this innovative collaborative software across age groups and cultures,” says SJSU Academic Technology’s Associate Vice-President, Mary Jo Gorney-Moreno. “We are looking forward to the results of this expanded utilization.”

### **The Value of Interaction for Engaging Students**

In articulating the value that ClassSpot brings to the classroom, Johnson references a faculty concern that students will be distracted by modern technologies like laptop computers and will not fully participate in class exchanges. With ClassSpot, student energy can be harnessed and channeled more effectively; students are invited to use personal machines to contribute back to the class discourse. “Part of the value of ClassSpot is student enthusiasm and engagement,” he says. “It is a way to bring them back to the

conversation and bring digital information into their discussions. ClassSpot improves instruction by adding student interaction back to the classroom.”

***Read more case studies at [www.tidebreak.com/casestudies](http://www.tidebreak.com/casestudies).***

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