Computers in Classrooms Can Increase Learning

Has Technology Increased Learning? , 2009

Rich Davis is a staff writer for the Evansville Courier and Press in Evansville, Indiana.

Just as the technologies before it are on their way out, computers in the classroom are becoming commonplace, to the benefit of teachers, parents, and students. They allow teachers to use electronic grade books, which parents can have access to and track their children's grades and academic progress. Computers and the Internet put information at teachers' fingertips, allowing them to teach in the moment rather than adhere to a prepared lesson. The technologies and software that come with computers, such as podcasting and on-demand streaming videos, engage students. Classrooms still seem the same as they did twenty years ago, but the expanding ways computers can be used in teaching and learning are changing that.

It's said that, in the 1830s, a well-educated teacher from out East came to the Evansville [Indiana] area and introduced a blackboard into his classroom.

Apparently, some people thought it was a lazy way to teach, for when he opened the school's clapboard door one morning, a critic had scrawled on the board:

"Any man of common sense,

would throw the blackboard over the fence."

At the end of the term, the teacher and the blackboard had to go.

Jason Bailey finds the anecdote amusing, but then, he would.

He's one of six "integrating curriculum and technology specialists" (iCats) with the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corp. [EVSC], all former classroom teachers now helping fellow educators get over the learning curve of new technology.

One recent morning inside the lab at the Christa McAuliffe Professional Development Center north of Downtown, Bailey watched as Candice Dodson gave Bosse High School world history teacher Bob Rogers pointers on using the electronic grade book.

"I'm not the first one to jump when something new comes along," chuckles Rogers, an 81-year-old who started teaching in Peru, Kan., in 1949 and recalls the EVSC's first computer, "Downtown—in the 1970s—took up half a basement," he says.

[Classroom] computers have made learning so much more real-time.
In 20 minutes Rogers felt fairly comfortable with the electronic grade book, an online system into which teachers input data that are accessible to parents.

Parents can log on with a password and monitor their child's grades, schedule, standardized tests and assignments, and even see if they've been tardy or had a discipline problem.

And it helps kids, too, says Dodson, a former elementary teacher.

"They can self-monitor, see where they missed an assignment or should have studied harder for a quiz."

Dodson and Bailey say the casual observer visiting a classroom today wouldn't notice many changes from 20 years ago, although VCRs are obsolete, not to mention 16mm projectors.

We're still a few years away from every student having a computer screen built into his desk, but many schools have computer labs or mobile laptop carts that can be wheeled in.

"When I started (teaching) 13 years ago, if you had a computer in your classroom, it meant you'd written a grant for it," says Bailey, who formerly taught English at Harrison High School.

**Par for the Course**

Today, a computer for the teacher is par for the course.

What's changing, the two trainers explain, are the expanded ways a classroom computer can be used.

Among devices finding their way into classrooms are document cameras plugged into the computer and a digital projector often hanging from the ceiling. It creates a "presentation station."

A teacher can plop down a picture or page out of a book and immediately show her class what she's talking about.

Better yet, beyond playing DVDs, some teachers can now access United Streaming—video-on-demand—and play video "segments" through the computer or projector.

"The beauty is it breaks down videos by chapter," says Dodson. "If I was teaching about Saturn, for example, I could just take the part on Saturn (not the entire 30-minute video on the solar system)."

She says the use of technology varies.

"Kindergartners still need to write their letters and go find A on the floor but for teachers, the computer is a valuable piece of equipment that makes our lives easier.

"I remember when I was studying to become a teacher (more than 20 years ago). They'd tell us to design a lesson. You'd have to think it up, write it out, go cut and paste, find pictures in magazines. If you wanted
something on Eskimos, you better find pictures of Eskimos. Today, you might go to a fifth-grade lesson plan site, type in 'Eskimo' and 'fifth-grade lesson,' and a huge amount of resources comes up.

"If I'm a teacher and one of my students says, 'What is the Iditarod?,' I can go in and find a picture immediately, show the kids the dogs, the route. I don't have to say, 'Well, tomorrow we'll talk about it.' Computers have made learning so much more real-time ... you don't lose that teaching moment when everyone is tuned in."

She also works with teachers on how to do podcasts. One fifth-grade teacher, she said, "noticed her students got more excited about their book reports" when an audio podcast showed the book cover and carried the voice of the student reading his report.

While Rogers uses a computer and sees its merits, especially for research by older students, he holds to some old ways and doesn't hide his disdain for standardized tests.

"Kids are no different today than when I started, just better informed.... The trouble with education today is that we have forgotten that we are not all the same."

He will continue to keep paper records of grades in folders. And, he says, he will continue to require his students to "write out in cursive writing" their term papers, knowing they will receive two grades—one for content, one for English.

"You have to be able to communicate or you're not going anywhere!"

Further Readings

Books
- Olivia N. Saracho and Bernard Spodek, eds. *Contemporary Perspectives on Science and Technology in


Periodicals
- Kate Baggott "Literacy and Text Messaging: How Will the Next Generation Read and Write?" Technology Review, December 21, 2006.
- David Warlick "A Day in the Life of Web 2.0: The Latest Powerful Online Tools Can Be Harnessed to Transform and Expand the Learning Experience," Technology & Learning, October 2006.


Source Citation:

Document URL