

The Hot Spot

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Newsletter Designed By Paul J. Rellinger
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CONFERENCE 2009: On all accounts, the annual Educational Technology Committee's (ETC) conference Advancing Learning: This is IT! 2009 conference was a success.



Another conference - Another success!

The conference, hosted by George Brown College was very well attended with more than 280 registrants from across the provincial college system. George Brown did an amazing job coordinating over 50 informative and interactive sessions that provided a high quality professional development opportunity for those who live teaching and learning every day. The organizing committee made sure there was plenty of opportunity for fun with such events as dinner at Toronto's Mystery Theatre and an Awards Banquet at Ontario Place. The acknowledgement of the hard work and dedication of this year's award recipients was complimented by the beautiful view of the lake and city skyline.

The ETC's annual conference is known for providing practical learning opportunities to the registrants and this year's event was no

exception. Keynote speakers Curtis Bonk, Diane Zorn and Kelly Park provided insight into the challenges and opportunities educators may encounter as they change the face of learning through the effective use of technology. The conference sessions continued on this theme by providing practical tips and examples of how technology is being used to enable learning. Session topics ranged from the effective use of Flip videos to a Beginner's Guide to Second Life to an overview of Humber College's Space Contact Story. Robert Marchessault, Professor at Georgian College was awarded The McGraw-Hill Ryerson Award for Innovation in Education for his presentation *Blogs, Wikis and Avalanches* (Available to read below). This award is presented annually and is designed to acknowledge and reward innovative teaching practices that incorporate

the integration of instructional technology leading to enhanced student learning.

Another highlight of the conference is the opportunity provided to attendees to network with other practitioners to connect, collaborate and create new strategies for working with their own students. Feedback from the participants confirmed the relevance of the topics, the professionalism of the presenters and the plethora of innovative ideas happening within the Ontario College System. For more information about the 2009 conference and award winners, please visit the ETC website at: <http://spin.mohawkcollege.ca/ETC/>

Congratulations to George Brown College, Shirley Lesch and the Conference Organizing Committee for a job well done!

Blogs, Wikis and Avalanches

by Robert Marchessault
Instructional Designer
Georgian College Centre for Teaching
& Learning

Writing and collaborative learning are two key ingredients of active learning. The term "active learning" has created a buzz among teachers for a while now with most professing that it forms the foundation for their teaching style. Blogs and wikis are recently developed online tools that reside on the Web and can be harnessed for assignments that engage students in active learning.

Technorati's State of the Blogosphere 2009 report (technorati.com) suggests that blogging is more popular than ever with millions of individual blogs out there. The

count is always increasing, but Carl Bialik of the Wall Street Journal says "measuring the impact of blogs requires more than counting". A large percentage of blogs are created (it's easy) but never used, or are password protected in order to share text and photos with a few friends only. For teachers what is the value of blogging? (I'll get to wikis in a moment.)

Blogs (short for "web logs") are a form of public journaling allowing writers to post entries on a regular basis. Topics are wide ranging and are usually from a personal point of view. Readers can subscribe to their favorite blogs and keep abreast of the writer's latest effort.

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The 2010 conference **Advancing Learning: Let's Get Creative!** will be hosted by Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning in Toronto from May 26, 27 & 28th. More details will be available soon through your college's ETC representative. In the meantime, mark your calendar and plan to attend!

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The Faculty Perspective: Online Learning

by Caleb Yong
Liberal Arts and Science Professor
Humber ITAL

Here's what I am just beginning to understand about online learning: it's fluid and highly individualized/subjective.

In the classroom setting student work is inextricably tied to whatever takes place in the classroom. (If the professor is lecturing, then all the students are supposed to sit and listen. If group work has been assigned, then all the students are supposed to work in groups. Etc...) In fact, I often find that one of the great challenges of in-classroom teaching is keeping all of my students (and myself) on task and on-the-same-page.

What's so exciting about online learning is that each student can (and will) access the course differently. The cool thing, however, is that our different ways of accessing/processing the course material happens simultaneously; unlike the typical classroom environment where everyone plays "Simon says with teacher." In the online environment we go about engaging in the class differently, but at the same time.

So what's my point? Well, it seems that as online faculty we have our work cut out for us. Because each student will be accessing the course in his or her own unique way, we have to make sure that we are using (and, thus offering them) a variety of tools in a relevant manner. When Student A, who really likes a structured learning environment with clear expectations noted at the start of the course – it needs to be there. If Student B is an independent learner who likes to research things for his or herself and would take advantage of teaching tools like web links, then they better be there too.

There's no disputing that this will take a lot of work to set up, but just think of the possibilities... Once a course is established, our job is to provide the students with as many tools as possible for them to customize their learning to their own skills and interests. I apologize for the "corniness" of this statement, but I almost imagine the ideal online course being like a wonderful "choose your own adventure" book. Every week each student navigates the book in their own way, only to confer through posts to gain a perspective and maybe even learning from each other's experience.

Buying A Home Computer?

By David Tierney
Conestoga College

So you want to buy a computer for home, and you're not sure where to start. Here are some tips:

Where do you buy?

For a pre-made system, you essentially have two choices—a "brand name" system from a company like Dell or HP, or a house special from an electronics store or a local computer shop. Buying brand name generally gets you a wider, more forgiving warranty, but at a higher price. Read over the support plans for a few different outlets to see where you're getting a better deal.

What do all these parts do?

CPU: The brain of the computer, this is used for heavy number crunching –if you're using huge databases or Excel files, you'll need a quick CPU. A fast CPU also helps run streaming video and games.

Memory/RAM: This lets your computer run things more smoothly and quickly. With extra RAM, your system will boot and launch programs more quickly, and will get less "tired" when lots of programs are running. RAM is most important for people doing media work or who use many programs at once, but everyone can benefit from a little more—RAM is cheap and has immediate effects on performance, so it's considered one

of the better investments when you're upgrading your system.

Hard Drives: These are what your files are stored on. Most systems these days come with staggering amounts of storage (more than the average user will ever use up), but you might take a hard drive upgrade option if you expect to do a lot of downloading or if you work with video files.

What don't I need to worry about?

If it's a work computer, you likely don't need to worry about sound, network, or video cards. These generally come on your motherboard, and will suit your needs just fine. A wireless network card is useful if you have WiFi at home; video cards are strictly for playing games... don't let your kids convince you they'll make Office go any faster.

Anything else?

The simplest advice I can give is just to shop around. Pick a price point you can afford, and find two or three different systems from different sources at that price—see which one gives you better components, or comes with a better service plan. Always take in-store sales pitches with a grain of salt—most big chains give their employees incentives to sell a particular brand of computer, and you'll only know if you're getting honest advice if you arm yourself with some research first.

Check IT Out!

Academica's Top Ten

Academica Group is Canada's leading source of market intelligence and full cycle marketing services for higher education. This market research group scans the Canadian Higher Education Landscape everyday and provides links to noteworthy events/activities.

Check it out at:

<http://www.academicagroup.ca/top10>

Screener

Create instant screencasts for use on Twitter. This is a web-based recorder that is compatible with Mac or PC. It plays everywhere, even on iPhones.

Check it out at:

<http://screener.com/>

60 Second Lecture

Developed by David Penrose of San Juan College, the goal is to create a learning environment where the teacher "tells less and the students do more."

Check it out at:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microlecture>

A fillable template is available at:

www.dpenrose.com/microlecture.pdf

Want to Contribute?

If you know about an interesting Instructional Technology tool or application and want to share it with your colleagues, then send your link with a brief description as to why you think it is helpful to Ruth.Hickey@humber.ca and we will include in the next HotSpot newsletter.

Tech Tricks & Tips:

DooWiki

By Dave Howard
Canadore College

So what's a DooWiki anyway?

It's an interesting tool that allows for easy editing of web pages. DooWikis can be edited by you or anyone, publicly or privately. This may be of particular interest to faculty and course designers. The DooWikis you create can be included within your college's learning

management system which means no additional login is needed to edit the page. The content that students create resides in the wiki but displays within the Learning Management System - should you choose to link it there.

More information is available at the website is at <http://www.doowikis.com/>

Continued From Page 1 Blogs, Wikis & Avalanches

The blog engines reside on the Web where writers and readers find them designed for ease of use. If you can use a word processor, you can write a blog. The tools are quite similar. (Check out www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com). The key thing to remember about a blog is that it is designed for a single writer.

Wikis are designed for multiple writers. They look and act like blogs by presenting text, images and other multimedia. However, they keep a history file of every change made by each of the authors allowing readers to see who's done what, when and how things looked before the changes were made.

Both blogs and wikis are accessed through a web browser and both allow readers to leave comments, opening things up into a multiple-way dialogue. Teachers who ask their students to complete writing assignments as individuals or in groups can see the possibilities.

Blogging assignments work best if they arc over an extended time period (5 - 14 weeks). This allows for the blog to evolve, find focus, and attract reader comments. When preparing a blog assignment

teachers must clearly show how the activity will help a student to achieve one or more course objectives. Assigning students to a blog (or wiki) without this will only seem to be "busy work" with cool technology. Topics may vary according to course subjects but often the idea is to ask students to respond to (or report about) issues, incidents, ideas and people. Blogs should have frequent entries (weekly?) that build on each other over time. Bloggers can insert hyperlinks in their text that act as instant references to sources. Reader comments should be considered and may influence the author's thinking and writing. Blogs entries are typically short, a paragraph or two, but add up to a substantial body by the end of a semester. Often, in a blogging assignment, the final post acts as a conclusion or summation.

Wiki assignments are a form of team work. A group of 2 - 5 students is assigned a wiki where they must collaborate on developing a web site consisting of one or more pages related to an assigned topic. The students assume roles (researcher, writer, editor, graphic artist, etc.). As with blogs, wiki assignments work best over extended periods of time. This allows for research and analysis, plus the time to design and develop the presentation of content. Wikis support text, images, multimedia and a

host of "widgets" for activities like polling. The tools are not difficult to learn. Each time any student author in a wiki makes and entry, change or edit, a record of that action is added to the wiki history file. Teachers may check the file to verify progress and who's doing what. An avalanche occurs when too many flakes of snow accumulate on a slope and suddenly slide down and overwhelm some poor fellow. In this case, the fellow is a teacher with too many blog or wiki assignments requiring checking and grading. The solution is to have a very clear and easy-to-use grading rubric plus some efficient method for noting and checking updates to student blogs or wikis. RSS feeds allow teachers to subscribe to blogs and wikis. Using a free feed reader (Google Reader or www.bloglines.com) aggregates all a teacher's blogging or wiki assignments onto a single web page. The feed reader automatically (each hour) checks all the sites that the teacher has subscribed to. Changes are reported and with a single click teachers may view the updated student work. This method dovetails nicely with the use of "milestones" as a form of project management.

Robert Marchessault is the Winner of the 2009 The McGraw-Hill Ryerson Award for Innovation in Education.

AWARD WINNERS!



Your 2009 ETC Reps

ALGONQUIN Gail Allan	DURHAM Chris Hinton	LAMBTON Lori Duquette	SHERIDAN Sandra Hodder (Chair)
BOREAL TBC	FANSHAWE Lisa Young	LOYALIST Jennifer Bryan	ST. CLAIR TBC
CAMBRIAN Greg Cooper	FLEMING Trudy Heffernan	MOHAWK Pat Anderchuck	ST. LAWRENCE Janet Roberston
CANADORE Joan Perron	GEORGE BROWN Shirley Lesch	NIAGARA Frank Bieri	VPA LIAISON Bob Carley Conestoga
CENTENNIAL Michael Evans	GEORGIAN Bob Marchessault	NORTHERN John Collins	
CONESTOGA Elizabeth Bowman	HUMBER Ruth Hickey	SAULT Peggy Storey	
CONFEDERATION Miriam Wall	LA CITE TBC	SENECA Jennifer Parker	

Interested in contributing to The HotSpot?

Share your idea by completing the webform at form at <http://spin.mohawkcollege.ca/ETC> - follow the link to newsletter. Once received, the editor will contact you with more details.

Remember: The HotSpot is only as good as its contributors!

Netbooks: They're Everywhere!

By Michael Evans, Director, Academic Technology, Centennial College

Netbooks are those cute little dwarf computers that have popped up everywhere. They claim to be internet-perfect devices with only limited application. Yet they have some immediately appealing characteristics. They're really small. Some can fit in a purse or "man-bag". They're inexpensive. You can pick one up for \$250. They run different operating systems: Windows XP, Vista, or 7, various breeds of Linux, and in some questionably legal cases, Mac OS X. And they actually run everything except the most demanding software. If you're curious about these little gizmos and have been considering buying one, read on.

First, some background. I'm an absolute gadget geek. I buy, sell, and trade almost any portable computer technology I can get my hands on. I have actually owned 15 different netbooks. I do not recommend this to the faint of heart. But given this propensity, I have learned a lot about using netbooks, the good and the bad. So here goes....

They all have common features. Small size, of course, is the essential characteristic and is generally measured by screen dimension. Netbook screens range from 7" to a bit over 11". They all have power saving processors, usually Intel Atom chips running at between 1.6 and 1.66 GHz. None of them have built-in DVD drives. You will need an external USB drive if you even need one at all. Hard drives are usually between 120 and 160 Gb although 250 Gb drives are beginning to show up. Some have SSD (solid state drive) chips rather than hard drives. These tend to be quite small, between 8 and 32 Gb, but fast. All have a similar complement of ports: 2-3 USB 2.0 ports, an Ethernet port, VGA port, and an SD card slot. RAM is usually 1 Gb. In some cases, this is upgradeable to 2 Mb. With few exceptions, netbooks are made of plastic. Many are finger print magnets as shiny finishes seem to be in vogue.

I have to say that most of the netbooks out there perform about the same regardless of processor. The difference between an Atom 270 and 280, the most common choice currently, for example, is imperceptible. And I do not recommend upgrading RAM as the improvements are barely noticeable. So how do netbooks distinguish

themselves from each other and how do you make an educated choice?

The Big Three.

There are three areas of netbook design that you should focus on in choosing one for your own.

1. The screen. Look for a resolution of 1024 x 640. This is the "sweet spot" in resolution as you will get maximum content and clarity on your screen. Lower resolutions start looking blurry and you lose content significantly. The size of the screen is up to you. 7" screens are small, believe me. If you have sight issues, they're certainly not for you. Try them out in the store by looking at a variety of web pages that you frequent. You'll know almost instantly. The most popular screen size is 10" As far as I'm concerned, this is the best melding of size and visibility. I am not a fan of the new 11" screens as they begin to blur the line between netbook and laptop. After all, we're in this for the portability. Most netbook screens are glossy and highly reflective, some in more annoying ways than others. I prefer matte, or non-glossy screens on netbooks, but you'll have to look around to find these. HP and Asus both have matte screens on some models. Again, try them out. Don't assume that a glossy screen will be problematic before you turn it on and see how it will look during operation.

2. The keyboard. This is always an issue and matter of preference. Keys are now approaching 90-92% of full-size on many netbook models. The smaller units are definitely not for touch typists. If you type like a monkey (like I do) this will be less of an issue. But if typing is critical, try the keyboard before you buy. As well, many manufacturers switch the size and location of common keys, very often the Shift keys, to accommodate for the small size of the computer. Make certain you can live with any keyboard configuration changes before you buy. Another characteristic is the general busy-ness of the keys. Many netbook keyboards have multiple symbols in different colors on each key, again to provide improved functionality within size limits. For some, this may prove distracting, or just plain ugly.

3. The battery. Battery life is always an issue for users interested in portability. The standard battery size for most netbooks has been a 3-cell battery that lasts about 2 and a half hours. For many, this is adequate assuming you can readily

plug in somewhere. Re-charging times vary, but are generally quite fast, 30-40 minutes for a full charge. Some companies offer upgrades to 6-cell batteries. These will last on average for about 5 hours. This is a very compelling upgrade to consider. One warning: In many cases, the style of the 6-cell battery causes a significant protuberance... it sticks out from the body of the computer, either from the back or the bottom. For some, this works well as a convenient typing stand by raising the angle of the computer when placed on a desk. It may also be easier to carry by providing a convenient handle of sorts. However, keep in mind that this will increase the overall size of the computer and may cause some difficulty in finding a slim case to accommodate the unit. The good news is that there is an increasing number of companies fitting larger capacity batteries into the main form of the computer. Asus, for example, has a number of models that have 6-cell batteries that fit flush to the computer and last up to 10 hours! This trend will only improve, but for now your choices for an all-day battery are limited.

Pricing is variable. If price is your biggest consideration, look for clear-outs. You won't lose on performance and functionality by purchasing last years' model assuming your requirements are fairly standard. But you're probably not going to run Photoshop on these things anyway (although you can, believe it or not). Of course you can spend up to \$1000 if you want (for a Sony X series). But prices generally range from \$250 - \$450. I suggest buying from a store with a generous return policy to be sure you have made the right purchase.

Can a netbook be your primary computer? Although most suggest "no" offhand, I say this will depend on your requirements. For a student, this may be all that's necessary. Ditto for many managers who require email, office applications, and internet access. Just hook up to a large monitor when at your desk. If you make use of cloud computing services such as Google Docs or Evernote (more on this in our next issue) a netbook may be the way to go. As computing requirements get refined, many may not need the overkill of a laptop that resembles a pizza box.

But overall, netbooks have become a clear market of their own. Originally marketed for kids and seniors, they are a viable choice for busy, mobile users looking for economy of size, performance, and prices.