

It's that time of year again...

Back to School Brings New Gadgets and Hype

August – when students and their parents look ahead to the new school year with high hopes tinged with a little anxiety. For parents, the anticipation of having the kids a little less underfoot is more than matched by the necessity of having to spend a pile of money on school supplies. For the kids, of course, want the coolest, latest clothes, sneakers and backpacks – plus flashy smartphones and tablets.

According to the Census Bureau, less than a third of what parents spend for their kids on clothes goes for books and academic supplies. But at \$2.2 billion in 2010 that is still quite a lot of money, and adding in the price of electronic devices can be a challenge for many budgets. How do you choose computers that will really help those young minds the most for the longest time at the least expense?

This is especially tricky because the technology is changing so rapidly. **Tablets**, for instance, unheard of just five years ago, are now touted as the ultimate tool for learning and entertainment. But are they actually that useful yet in school, or are they still largely just new, shiny toys?

The simple fact is that though all these glittering life-changing gizmos will indeed completely reshape teaching and learning someday, the revolution has barely begun. Teachers themselves are still trying to figure out just how to use this stuff, much less employ it to improve classes.

It's no secret that American education is extremely outdated. The long day divided into periods marked by bells, summer vacations, neat rows of desks, and the same subjects for everybody, were all meant to turn 19th century farm children into 20th century factory workers, clerks, and secretaries. It's a painfully obsolete model but despite many experiments, a new one hasn't been agreed upon, partially because nobody has figured out yet what a 21st century economy is really all about. All that anybody's sure of is that the future will require a lot of science, and that endless change means that learning's going to have to be lifelong for everyone from now on. Meanwhile, the technology keeps on evolving at an ever faster rate.

The bad news is that this means there's bound to be a lot of floundering about in the years to come. There will be many failed endeavors and dead ends. The good news is that meanwhile a student can still manage to get by with traditional tools plus school resources, but a few carefully chosen devices of one's own can really help.

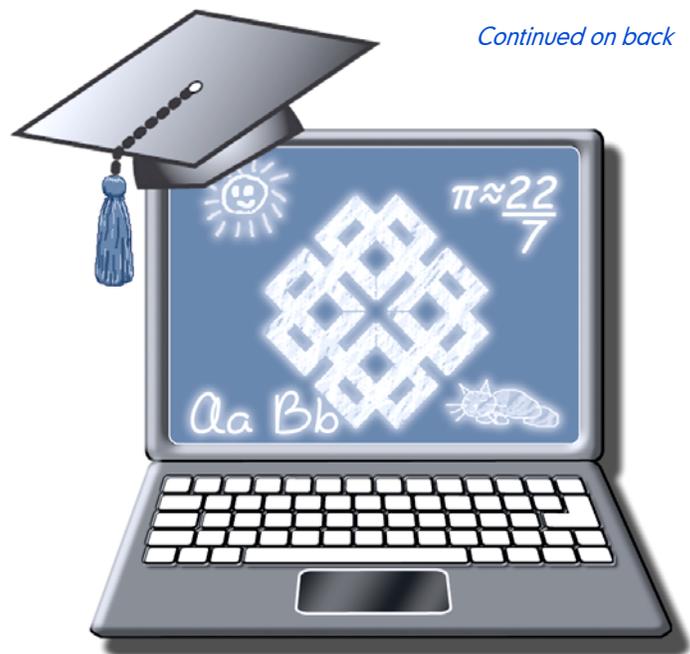
PC, laptop, or tablet?

The Census Bureau reports that in the nation's classrooms there is still less than one computer for every four pupils, so it will be a while yet before all schools are wired. Nonetheless, virtually all colleges and most high schools already have **computing centers** where students can use computers for research, writing papers, and working problems – plus get help with their basic computer skills, which have already become as necessary as the ABCs.

Outside, students are generally on their own. Their available options differ greatly in price, convenience, and usefulness. Home **personal computers** pack the biggest bang for the buck, and equipped with an Internet connection and printer, are very convenient for homework. Also, keeping it in a public area gives parents one place at least where they can keep an eye on the kids' online activities.

However, PCs are not very portable. **Laptops** are, and even the smallest, called **netbooks**, have keyboards and usually enough memory to function much like PCs. But their downside is also their portability, as they can be easily stolen or dropped. Accessories including a good physical **lock**, like the Kensington cable lock, a sturdy **case** or cover (custom ones can be found on Etsy www.etsy.com), and a **flash drive** like the SanDisk Cruzer for emergency backups and file swapping are all very useful. A plug-in mouse and various adapters and power supplies can also be quite handy.

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When getting a new computer, you may be able save money by avoiding the very latest model and buying one that's about to be replaced by a newer design. Be careful about getting off-brand products that might be obsolete, problematic, or lack support, though. This is especially true in newer categories, like netbooks and tablets.

If you're stuck with an old machine, SWCP may be able to help make it run as good as new. We offer a *free* virus/spyware scan each year for members' computers, as well as affordable repair and installation services. Problems can be diagnosed, parts and new software installed, and we can even update your operating system. Call or email Tech Support for information.

More tablets are coming out each day, all competing with flashy new features. The **iPad 3**, **Kindle Fire**, and the brand-new **Nexus 7** have all had some excellent reviews, and the giant corporations behind each one – Apple, Amazon, and Google, respectively – seem intent on dominating the e-textbook market entirely. But all those efforts are in their infancy, and will take some time to work out.

The advantage of a tablet is extreme portability – handily replacing a backpack stuffed with heavy texts with one handheld device. But they remain largely information displays, not tools for creation, though many apps are being created to help study. For schoolwork, real keyboards and mice are still easier for most people than touchscreens.

Moreover, tablets are limited in terms of output. The iPad, for instance, has no **USB ports**, so all data can only go up to the cloud. In areas or situations without **Wi-fi** or phone connections, students are limited to what they have downloaded. This can make printing or moving files to a machine difficult so in some ways iPads are little more than a smartphone with a really big screen.

Beyond the classroom

Another trend possibly at least as significant as technology invading the classroom is that which replaces it. It's already possible to get a good education without ever setting foot on an actual campus. For decades, many colleges have had **remote learning programs** which supply videotaped lectures to students. Originally located just in special study areas, they nowadays often furnish their recorded libraries online to students, available at any time.

More recently, however, online learning has really taken off. Many educators have noted with some envy the amazing success of **Khan Academy** (www.khanacademy.org), started by Sal Khan as a math tutor on YouTube. Now it offers well over 3000 videos, and a free world-class education, mainly in higher math, where students can get feedback and even track their progress.

Other institutions have followed, of course, including some fly-by-night diploma mills looking to make money. But many big-name schools are pooling resources and talent into impressive online programs of their own. For example, you can take free courses online and even earn a degree from Harvard, Yale, Stanford and other universities at **Academic Earth** (www.academicearth.org).

Coworking? What is it?

by Jamii Corley, Vice President

Recently I've been telling people about our new coworking space and I'm sometimes met with either a quizzical look or a weary expression. I think this is because people don't know what coworking spaces are or what value they bring.

More and more people are finding themselves working alone, either as telecommuters, freelancers, or consultants. This may be by choice or as a necessity, but it means people have to wear many hats, from marketing to tax lawyer to web site developer. And that leads to less time working on the things you're passionate about.

The term **coworking space** means many things to different people. To some it's a place to get office amenities in an inexpensive way without long term contracts. To others it's a community of diverse, friendly people who can help you out when you run into a problem that's outside your area of expertise. And it lets you pass on knowledge that you have to help someone else hitting a snag. It's a place to kick around ideas with smart people from diverse backgrounds. The latter is the kind of coworking space we're building. In addition to being a comfortable place to work or meet a client, it's a place for short educational seminars on things that will help a small business get moving, or get you started in a new field that you've wanted to investigate. A place to meet interesting people and get excited about your work again.

To try and jump start our community we're sponsoring a Friday lunch Meetup called "**Friday at Ideas and Coffee**". Each week we'll line up someone whose specialties are something that would benefit our community of freelancers, telecommuters, entrepreneurs, and consultants. Please join us if you find the topic interesting.

So far we've had a Show and Tell on building a website with WordPress, and we'll be having a presentation on Getting Started with Renewable Energy, (Aug 17). We're lining up a someone who is very knowledgeable on Intellectual Property Law. In September expect a seminar on Basic Ecommerce using WordPress. If there's a topic you think our community would benefit from let us know and we'll see if we can find someone to talk about it.

We're organizing these weekly seminars through **Meetup**. To check what's coming up on the schedule, please see <http://www.meetup.com/Friday-at-Ideas-and-Coffee/>.



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