

Don't throw all the old stuff out just yet

Back to School Requires Smart Tech Choices

Parents may be excused if they haven't noticed the tremendous changes in education that have begun in recent years, while for kids it's all change, just as it always has ever been. But parents should realize that by now in 2013, all students of college age or younger have grown up in a **digital world**.

From the cradle on, the young been surrounded by the Web, email, cellphones, cameras and the rest. So naturally they're fascinated with gadgets and what they can do. For their elders, while children's online safety is still a prime concern and always will be, it's no longer quite the same bogeyman it used to be.

Even if the lectures fell on deaf ears, law enforcement and the technology to fight bad guys have improved. For instance, it may be hard to believe, but the online security firm Symantech reports that the total global volume of **spam** is currently flat or slightly declining. It's less than half now of what it was just a year ago.

Regular reminders about the need for good practices are provided by frequent horror stories of hacked accounts in the news. Many security experts have come to agree that better forms of authenticating users than **passwords** are needed, but there's no great alternatives available yet. However, kids may now be more savvy about such issues than their parents are – at least enough to easily evade the controls their caretakers might attempt to impose.

But security is just one concern. Another is how much this new technology really enhances learning, making studying easier and more productive. Or does it just add a needless layer of complexity, cost, and bother? How is a parent to know what's most helpful and what's just either a waste or an expensive toy?

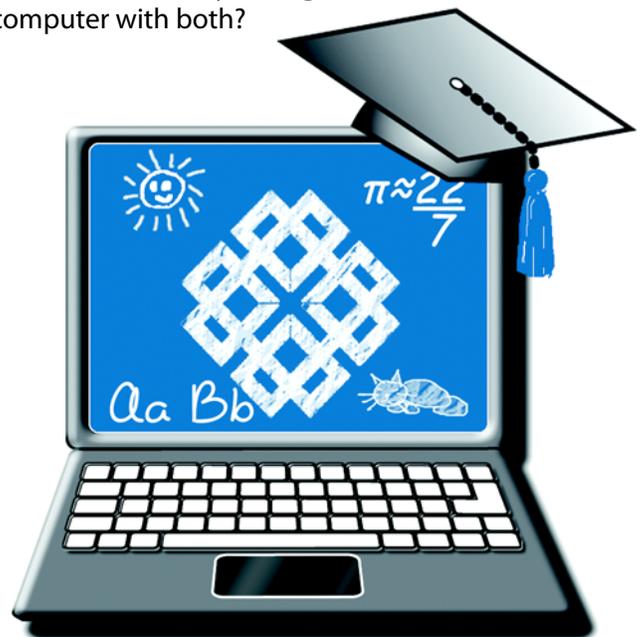
Families on tight budgets should relax, for much of this technology is still in transition. Many of the exciting new devices introduced in the last several years, such as touch-screen **tablets**, are still in the process of development. So along with being rather pricey, their best uses haven't been quite worked out yet.

Unheard of just three years ago, tablets are marketed as the ultimate tool for learning and entertainment. There are many makes and sizes. Along with the cool, expensive **iPad** (though the new Mini version goes for only \$329), there's a shelf-full of often cheaper Windows models, and the **Surface** is under \$350.

Despite the vast number of apps available, particularly for full-size iPads, tablets still haven't found their proper niche. They neither quite replace smartphones nor laptops. Moreover, they are much better suited for consuming content than creating it.

In some ways a tablet is little more than a smartphone with a really big screen. They can be nearly as limited, too, in terms of both output and input. The iPad, for instance, has no **USB ports**, so data can only go up to the cloud. In areas or situations without **Wi-fi** or phone connections, students are constrained to what they have downloaded. Transferring or printing out files can also be a problem.

While tablets can be used for writing papers or making presentations, their operating systems are not as robust as that of a PC. Also, their on-screen keyboards are not that easy to use typing long compositions. Since a physical keyboard and printer connections are so useful, why not get a computer with both?



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Use effective, appropriate tools

Tablets are set to outsell most everything else this year. But for the kinds of productivity students need, a regular **laptop** or the lightweight variety called **netbooks** are better. They are as portable as tablets, yet almost as powerful as **desktop PCs**. Moreover, laptop categories are converging, getting smaller, lighter, more powerful, and less expensive.

Students can still manage to get by with traditional tools as well as by being clever with newer devices. For instance, educational ebooks face both technical issues and copyright problems just with people taking **notes**, especially if they want to share them.

Yet old-fashioned textbooks with highlighters and pencils still work fine. For studying literature, many classics can be found online free in ebook formats, saving late-night trips to bookstores and libraries. Rather than budget funds for dedicated scientific calculators, atlases, and so forth, check out what smartphone apps and free online resources are available.

When shopping for a new computer, save cash by avoiding the very latest, flashiest model for the one it's about to replace. But if you avoid the glamor of coolness, don't fall for the cheapest off-brand knock-offs either which might be poorly made, buggy, or lack support. Newer categories like netbooks and tablets are evolving rapidly, and what is fresh and different today might not even be around tomorrow.

SWCP may be able to help make old machines 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. Please call or email Tech Support for more information.

Watch out for the MOOCs

In fiction, "mooks" are pawns used by the villain. But **MOOCs** are "Massive Open Online Courses." The latest thing in remote education, these are lectures delivered over the Net to myriads of students at once. Some academics, tempted to become "superprofessor" stars, are strongly in favor of MOOCs, but the rest of the community is more dubious. Aside from hurting other teachers, dropout rates are about 90%, and there are learning assessment concerns.

While education is quite possible online, such programs depend chiefly on student motivation. Many pupils need more than a small screen can deliver. Maybe even sites like the famous **Khan Academy** (www.khanacademy.org) are best employed to aid regular courses and give refreshers.



Upcoming Events for Geeks and Nerds

The calendar gets full of conferences and meetings in the late summer. Here's a few of the more geeky to choose from. SWCP staff members will be attending all of these, and several, like the Coworking Alliance showcase and WordCamp, we are proud to help sponsor. Hope to see you there!

- **Bubonicon 45 Science Fiction and Fantasy Convention** (bubonicon.com), August 23-25, Marriott Uptown Hotel. Connect with local fans and writers. There's an Art Show, Dealers Room, Panel Discussions, Gaming, and even a Costume Contest. Full event passes are \$45 at the door, but youth and day passes are also available. Kick it off with a booksigning by local Hugo nominee Daniel Abraham and Ty Frank of their third novel together, *Abaddon's Gate* at Alamosa books on Thursday, Aug. 22.
- **Albuquerque Mini Maker Faire**, August 24-25, (www.albuquerque-minimakerfaire.com) at the Anderson-Abruzzo International Balloon Museum and Balloon Fiesta Park, Albuquerque. Celebrate the do-it-yourself spirit by creating, building or altering things. Inventors, tinkerers, artists and others gather to share their projects at this family-friendly event with creative demonstrations and activities. Passes are available online.
- **Tech Fiesta Albuquerque**, is a week-long series of events spread around the city showcasing local technical talent and community. Starting with **TEDxABQ**, on Saturday, Sept. 7, it continues with the **Coworking Alliance** on Mon. the 9th, **Sandia and Startups Showcases** on Tues., **IgniteNM**, a series of fast-paced presentations of community chosen topics, the next evening at the Convention Center, and a **Higher Education Talent Showcase** on Thursday. Details at www.techfiestaabq.com.
- **WordCamp Albuquerque** finishes off the Tech Fiesta celebration, Sept. 13-15, at the Convention Center downtown., Explore and be inspired by the dazzling potentials of the popular **WordPress** publishing platform for newbies and experts alike. Learn more at 2013.albuquerque.wordcamp.org.



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