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Educators Find the iPad a Useful Aid in the Classroom

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Since the creation of the chalkboard over 120 years ago, the classroom has seen significant changes, each invention revolutionizing the way students learn. Today, the classroom continues to evolve and has been introduced to a new type of technology – one that is touch sensitive, lightweight and compact – the iPad.

A tablet device released by Apple Inc. in April of 2010, the iPad has been praised by many for its ability to perform a number of the same tasks as a laptop, with half the weight and twice the portability. Shortly after the iPad's premiere, companies such as Verizon Wireless and Blackberry, among others, released similar products.



Jeanne Koehler, visiting instructor in educational studies, using the iPad in conjunction with the Smartboard

Critics of the iPad first saw it only as a larger version of the company's earlier product, the iPhone. What some perceived as just another gadget, however, is quickly becoming a valuable tool for educators, from elementary school teachers to college professors, including a few at Illinois Wesleyan University.

According to Professor Jeanne Koehler, visiting instructor in educational studies, the iPad enhances pedagogy and eases the administrative tasks of teaching. With a variety of educational applications, or apps, ranging from math and engineering games to word puzzles, students of all ages can be engaged in a fun, hands-on learning experience. Even one of the iPad's most popular games, Angry Birds, can have educational purposes, according to Koehler, with the goal of the game achieved through manipulating angles.

For the educator, the iPad also serves as a useful way to keep track of simple administrative tasks, such as taking attendance, recording student participation and creating seating charts. Apps such as Teacher Pal store all the information a teacher may need for the classroom. The convenience of having everything located in one place is an incentive for using the iPad, as Koehler has noted from personal experience.

The iPad also works in conjunction with interactive white boards, including the Smartboard. First introduced to businesses in 1991, the interactive whiteboard is a touch-sensitive screen that displays the connected device (usually a computer) on to a whiteboard. It brings a similar convenience that overhead projectors and transparency sheets once did, but now with access to a myriad of educational programs and all the information the internet has to offer.

When connected to the interactive whiteboard, anything the teacher does on the iPad can be displayed before the class, such as looking at a textbook and highlighting certain areas. "It makes learning a more visual experience," said Koehler, who is currently experimenting with the iPad in her fieldwork.

With the iPad connected to these interactive whiteboards, the teacher can easily share articles on current events found on the internet, which "opens the door to bringing immediate, real-time, high interest stories into the classroom," said Koehler. The simplicity of sharing is another advantage, as teachers no longer need to save URL links or search for the Website again, only to wait for the computer to load as the class loses attention; rather, teachers can leave the page open on the iPad and bring it to class with them.

According to Koehler, the portability of the iPad also allows for better student-teacher interaction. Teachers are no longer tethered to a chalkboard in the front of the room. Instead, they can walk around the classroom with the iPad while engaging students, even handing the device to them, allowing for a more immediate, hands-on experience.

In August of this year, the Educational Studies Department purchased one iPad for Koehler to begin researching how the device could reshape educational pedagogy. In October, the department received news that the PNC Foundation, the philanthropic branch of PNC Financial Corporation, will provide additional support to expand the integration of iPads into a number of Educational Studies' course offerings.

As the Educational Studies Department begins to see the effects of the iPad in the classroom, the School of Music is finding practical uses for the new technology, as well. Brian Russell, assistant professor of music and director of the Illinois Wesleyan University Choir, began using the iPad in the classroom this year after the School of Music purchased three devices for the use of faculty and staff. Russell uses the iPad to record students conducting their peers in his 200-level choral conducting class, as well as students teaching in the field for his 300-level music education class. He then uploads the videos to YouTube for student comments and reflection. "It allows me to make course content very real for my students in a format they are accustomed to consuming," said Russell.

Implementing the iPad to its fullest extent, he has also given a lecture during the University Choir's rehearsal on proper breathing techniques and the vocal process, using an app originally designed for medical students.



Brian Russell, assistant professor of music, using the iPad to record students in his 200-level choral conducting course.

For smaller tasks, Russell has eliminated the traditional sign-in sheet for class and replaced it with an attendance-tracking app, which not only takes attendance, but also has the option of displaying the students' picture next to his or her name. This way, Russell explains, he can more easily put names to faces, which is useful when conducting a choir of 75 or teaching a class of 15.

Senior Stephanie Krausen, a Hispanic Studies major with a concentration in K-12 education, is actively trying to incorporate the use of the iPad into her student teaching experience at Normal Community West High School. Krausen believes the ideal situation would be for each student to have

an iPad, "in order to be engaged in the classroom through the use of his or her own device," she said. Through Apple Inc., schools have the option of purchasing the iPad Learning Lab, a mobile cart that comes with 10 iPads and can secure, charge and sync up to 30 iPads for classroom-to-classroom use, making the ideal situation a reality.

The use of the iPad in the classroom is still in its experimental stages, however educators are willing to give the device a trial run. "The actual practicality of it is still very new, so you have to research by action rather than looking at what the experts say, as there aren't many iPad experts yet," said Koehler, who plans on integrating her findings on the technology into her 300-level education class, Curriculum and Pedagogy in the Humanities, in the spring.

Associate Professor of Educational Studies Leah Nillas, who instructs pre-service teachers on how to use the iPad as a teaching, learning and professional development tool, agrees with Koehler. "There is more to learn about the iPad. Keeping up with new changes will always be a challenge," said Nillas.

During the spring of 2012, members of the Educational Studies Department will attend a workshop led by Koehler, Nillas and a representative from Apple Inc. on how to use the iPad in their courses.

As for other types of classroom technology, Koehler believes a new trend will eventually move toward smart phones, such as the iPhone and Blackberry, as many students are beginning to enter high school already equipped with these devices. Holding many of the capabilities of an iPad, these phones can be easily hooked up to an interactive whiteboard as well, allowing students to share information with the entire class. Koehler speculates that the use of cell phones in the classroom could be a difficult transition, as educators have traditionally seen them as a distraction, yet they are becoming sufficient tools for learning.

"The iPad, and other devices like it, are allowing for a growth in education. I think it is exciting that Illinois Wesleyan views this new technology as an opportunity to allow professors to explore how this will work in our own classrooms and beyond," said Koehler.

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