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The Latest In Plasma & LCD Technology Page 051

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THE EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY GUIDE ISSUE 10

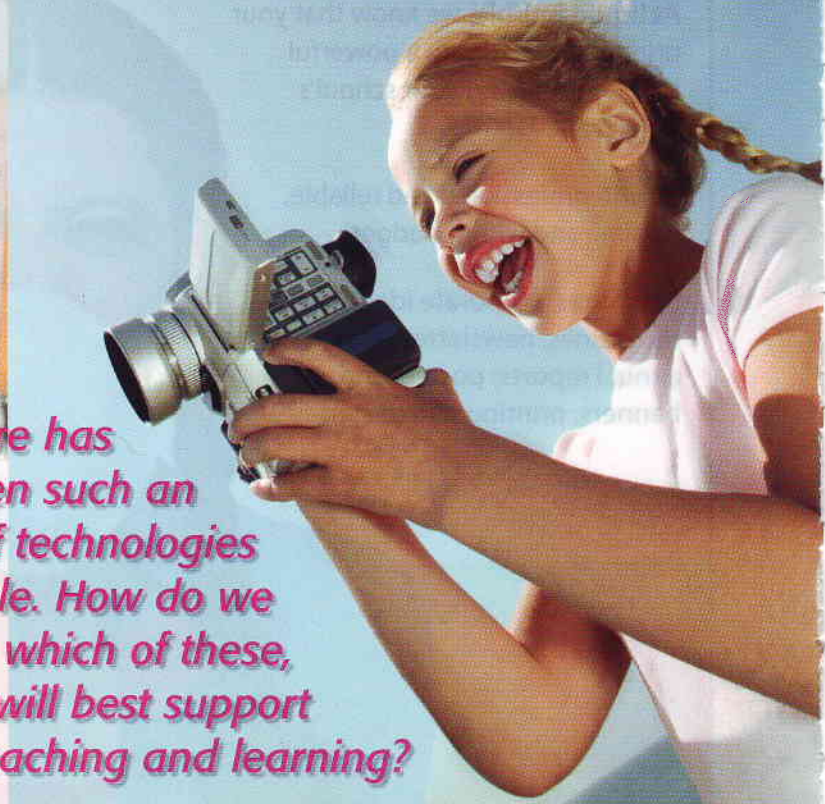
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Choosing LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES



Never before has there been such an array of technologies available. How do we decide which of these, if any, will best support our teaching and learning?



Blogs, wikis, podcasts or just an LMS? What letter are we up to now? We embraced e-learning, but now it seems we have to move into m-learning and i-learning. Yes – that's definitely an italic 'i'!

What is this new language we have all had to learn? And what happens to those of us who have just mastered last year's vocabulary only to find there's a new set for this year?

Never before have we had such an array of technologies available to support teaching and learning. But which do we use, why, when, where and how?

The answer is quite simple - there is only one technology to use - the RIGHT one! But how do we choose the right one and is one enough? Is it the latest high tech machine that goes 'Bing!?' Or could it be as simple as a CD?

There are many ways of categorising learning technologies. For our purposes here, I have divided them into two categories:

1. Distributed
2. Interactive

Distributed implies one-way delivery with no interaction between teacher and learners or among learners, for example, print, podcasts. (Although you can build in some delayed interaction around these using other technologies.)

Interactive refers to delivery modes that provide for interaction among all participants in various ways. Interactive can be further divided into two categories:

1. Synchronous (real-time), for example, audio, web and video conferencing, instant messaging and chat.
2. Asynchronous (delayed time), for example, email, bulletin boards, listservs, blogs

How many times have you heard about the introduction of these technologies with great fanfare only to hear no more about them? Spectacular failures have been rampant and one must ask, 'Why?'. Some questions come immediately to mind:

Who made the decisions? With whom did they consult? On what basis was this technology chosen? What was the input of those expected to use it?

Choosing The Right Technology

I see two levels at which technological decisions are made in a learning organization. The first is the initial decision to purchase and have available a particular technology for use by teachers. The second is the decision-making

process engaged by the teacher for each particular learning experience.

There are a number of issues to be considered and a number of people to be consulted when considering a new technology.

Establish your needs - then choose the technology

Your needs should always dictate which (if any) technology should be used. A common mistake is to start with the technology and then find a use for it. Any technology should be just another delivery tool.

Focus on the learners and their needs, the teachers and their needs. What are your objectives? Do you need to have high level interaction and the ability to show moving images? The question to ask is: which medium will BEST convey my message? For example, accounting principles can be effectively taught through text and diagrams, but brain surgery definitely needs some moving colour images!

If you need a high level of person-to-person interaction in your course, then one of the synchronous technologies will be needed.

Look at the range of technologies – do not be seduced by just one.

There are a number of technologies that may suit your needs. No single technology is superior to all the others. It is very easy to become entranced by the latest, which has 'flashing lights' and all sorts of 'bells and whistles'.

Look carefully at your needs and objectives. (Do you have needs and objectives? Or are you just buying into technology for the sake of it?)

There are a series of questions to ask here: Do I need sound, colour and/or motion? How available/ accessible is this technology? Will the students have easy access to it and be comfortable using it? How much does it cost - and how much money do I have?

Include the users in your selection process

If the users do not like the technology they will not use it! It's amazing how many good reasons they will find not to use it. Or they may simply ignore it and go their own way.

I constantly work with organisations that have 'imposed' a technology because the Chief Executive Officer and/or the Information Technology section have decided that 'this is the way to go'. The amount of time that it then takes to change the negative attitudes of teachers and students is totally counterproductive. In

some cases, resistance has been so high that the implementation of the technology has failed completely.

Technologists are very good at knowing the technology, but often do not have educational experience. They should be part of your team, but remember, they are seeing the technology with a different set of values to educators.

Teachers should be included on the panel that selects any new technology. They know what they need in order to teach effectively and can evaluate how a new technology could enhance their teaching. After all, there is no use introducing a new technology if it is not going to enhance the teaching/learning process.

Consider the needs of your learners

Learning is about learners. Just as teachers have to be comfortable with a new technology, so do the learners. Be sure that you are not limiting access by some students through the choice of your technology. For example, the introduction of videoconferencing will preclude any students who do not have access to broadband.

Also consider the learning styles of your students. Some will prefer learning through interaction with vision, while others will not respond to this so well.

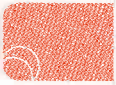
Which will I choose?

Given that an organisation has made informed decisions about the technologies that are available, you, as teacher, face the task of incorporating these into your learning program. In order to make informed decisions, it is necessary to understand the technologies - their potential and limitations.

What are the technologies?

We do not have enough space here to take an in-depth look at the available technologies, but if you are not familiar with any of the following, I suggest you look them up in wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). All of these are being used to some degree for teaching and learning:

- Email
- Bulletin boards, discussion lists, listservs
- CDs, DVDs
- Instant Messaging
- SMS & MMS
- Chat
- Blogs – text, audio and video
- Wikis
- Learner Management Systems
- Audio, web, video conferencing
- Audio and video streaming



	Motion	Still Images	Audio	Text	Synchronous	Asynchronous	Large Group	Small Group
Email				✓		✓	✓	✓
Bulletin boards				✓		✓	✓	✓
Discussion lists				✓		✓	✓	✓
Listservs				✓		✓	✓	✓
CDs, DVDs	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Instant Messaging				✓	✓			
Chat				✓	✓			
SMS				✓		✓	✓	✓
MMS	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Blogs - text, audio and video	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Wikis		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
LMS	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Audio conference			✓		✓		✓	✓
Web conference	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Video conference	✓		✓					✓
Audio streaming			✓			✓	✓	✓
Video streaming	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
Podcasts	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
VoIP			✓		✓			✓

- Podcasts (the new video ipod has recently been released)
- VoIP ,for example, Skype

Convergence

Although I have listed each of the above as separate and definable technologies, these boundaries are being blurred and we are seeing a convergence of all onto the one platform.

Characteristics

In order to simplify the process of choosing the right technology, I have allocated each of

the technologies a series of characteristics in the table following. These are by no means exhaustive, but may help in making decisions about which technology to use.

In Conclusion

We live in an era when technology surrounds us and offers many opportunities. However, exercise your knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning to provide learners with instructional solutions - not technological ones! Wise choices and the use of new technology can greatly extend and enhance the learning

experience.

If you would like to keep abreast of learning technologies and how others are using them, join the Learning Technologies User Group (www.ltug.org)

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