Kathy Schrock's Tech Quest

What are portable devices and how can I use them?

by Kathy Schrock

The Quest: How to Choose and Use Portable Devices

A reader wrote that she would love to have more computers in her classroom. However, she doesn't have the school funds to buy them, and even if she did, she doesn't have enough space or electrical outlets to support them. So she's looking for alternatives that will stretch her limited funds and benefit as many students as possible. An option I recommend is to buy a set of smaller, less-expensive portable computers -- Personal Digital Assistants, or PDAs -- to supplement classroom computers or your school computer lab. PDAs are less expensive than desktop computers (the ones reviewed here run from $150 to $225 each) and they are small enough for students to use at their desks, in the library, or even on a field trip. To learn more about portable devices and their practical applications, we'll go on a Tech Quest together. Each letter in "quest" stands for a step we'll take. In addition, each quest is aligned with one of the standards from the International Society for Technology in Education's "ISTE Recommended Foundations in Technology for All Teachers." For more information, visit http://www.iste.org/.

Q **Questioner: Who is going on the quest?** It may be a classroom teacher, technology coordinator, or library media specialist.

U **Understanding: What is the purpose of the quest?** What are portable devices and what can they do? How can students use them? How can these devices work in tandem with my desktop computer? How much do they cost?

E **Explanation: Exploring options for finding an in-depth answer** There are numerous ways to integrate technology into the curriculum with portable devices. In my district, students grab their PDAs for such tasks as writing, note taking, and data collection. For example, during a cooperative learning

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project, some groups of students may choose to have each member take notes on his or her own device. Other groups may choose to use one device only, passing it among the team members who each input their notes. Either way, kids can then hook their PDAs up to our desktop computers, compile the information, and print out final documents. Reflect on how you might use these devices, and then consider the following options.

AlphaSmart 3000 and 3000 IR

The AlphaSmart 3000 and 3000 IR are keyboard-like devices that hold up to 100 pages of text. The small screen displays four lines of text at once. Its features include spell check, cut/copy/paste, and an automatic shutoff (a real battery-saver). You can also load it with "mini" software programs, tutorials (such as one to improve typing skills), and templates (called Applets) that you can download or order from the AlphaSmart Web site (http://www.alphasmart.com/).

The *IR* in AlphaSmart 3000 IR stands for *infrared,* which works like a TV remote control. To transfer data from your AlphaSmart to a word-processing document on your Macintosh or PC, just aim the AlphaSmart 3000 IR at the IR receiver on your desktop computer, and *voilà.* Many new computers have IR receivers, but if yours doesn't, you have two options. You can either purchase an infrared pod from AlphaSmart for $20 to attach to your computer, or you can use the Y-cable (which allows the AlphaSmart and your keyboard to be attached simultaneously) to connect your computer to the AlphaSmart. To transfer text from your desktop computer back to the AlphaSmart (which is helpful if your students bounce back and forth between the two), you can purchase *Get Utility,* a software package from AlphaSmart that costs $19. If you're low on funds, check out the company's Web site for the AlphaSmart 2000 IR (an older version of the AlphaSmart 3000 IR). They're cheaper ($149), but don't have the cut/copy/paste feature or mini-software programs. **AlphaSmart 3000 and 3000 IR facts:**

✔ Size: 12.4" x 9.3" x 1.9" ✔ Weight: about 2 lbs. ✔ Batteries: three AA batteries last 200 to 500 hours ✔ Price: $199 without IR; $224 with IR (you can also get discounts when buying 25 or more) ✔ Web site: http://www.alphasmart.com/ ✔ Toll-free number: (888) 274-0680

Palm IIIe

Handheld Palm devices have been around for a long time in the corporate world, but now their use in schools is growing. Students can take notes by tapping the Palm's on-screen keyboard or by writing on the screen with a stylus. Because kids might have difficulty writing with the Palm's specialized alphabet (called Graffiti), you may want to purchase a few Landware GoType! Keyboards, which come with free word-processing software, at about $70 each (http://www.landware.com/products/gotype/gotypeps.html [800] 526-3977). These are small (10" x 4" x 0.75", 11 oz.), full-size keyboards which connect to the Palm so students can easily type into it (see picture, above right). There are hundreds of *freeware* (free software) and *shareware* programs (software that you can use for a limited time) that you can download from the Palm

Handspring Visor

The Handspring Visor is a new competitor of the Palm, which can run Palm software. You can download or buy freeware and shareware for the Visor (such as a vocabulary trainer, nursery rhyme software, and more) at the company's Web site (go to http://www.handspring.com/ and then click on "Software Links"). In addition to all the features of the Palm, including being able to work with a $70 Landware GoType! Keyboard (visit http://www.landware.com/gotype/visor.html or call [800] 526-3977 for details), the Visor has a slot in the back where you can add Springboard Modules. These modules, which are mostly made by third-party manufacturers, include modems, voice recorders, audio players, and electronic

GoType Keyboard

books, with many more planned for the future (for details, go to the Handspring Web site and then click on "Products," or call Handspring at the number below). With this expandability, the Visor has many possibilities for the classroom. **Handspring Visor facts:** ✔ Size: 4.8" x 3" x 0.7" ✔ Weight: 5.4 oz. ✔ Batteries: two AAA batteries will last up to 30 days with daily use ✔ Price: about $180 with the cradle ✔ Web site: http://www.handspring.com/ ✔ Toll-free number: (888) 565-9393

Video Blaster WebCam Go

To incorporate pictures and videos into all areas of the curriculum, students can use the Video Blaster WebCam Go from Creative Labs. This little PC-only video camera can be attached to the

company's Web site (go to http://www.palm.com/ and then click on "Web Resources"). These include spreadsheets, databases, and drawing applications. To exchange information with your PC, simply place the Palm in the cradle (a specially equipped holding device that comes with the Palm) and press a button. If you use a Macintosh, Palm sells separate connection kits. Students can also "beam" information to each other's Palms with the infrared feature. **Palm IIIe facts:** ✔ Size: 4.7" x 3.2" x 0.7" ✔ Weight: 6 oz. ✔ Batteries: two AAA batteries last up to 30 days with daily use ✔ Price: about $180 ✔ Web site: http://www.palm.com/products/palmiiiese/index.html ✔ Toll-free number: (800) 881-7256

video camera can be attached to the computer to do Internet videoconferencing and create video clips for *PowerPoint* or *Hyperstudio* presentations. It's also portable so kids can take digital still pictures around school or on field trips. The WebCam comes with software for conferencing and image editing. If you're lucky enough to get a classroom set, you'll find that the possibilities are practically unlimited. **Video Blaster WebCam Go facts:** ✔ Size: 3" x 5.5" x 1.5" ✔ Weight: 5.8 oz. ✔ Batteries: two AAA batteries last for about 300 snapshots ✔ Price: $150 ✔ Web site: http://www.soundblaster.com/video/webcam-go/ ✔ Toll-free number: (800) 998-1000

S **Sources: Finding out more information** For more details and ordering information, see the product-fact sections above.

T **Thoughts: Afterward, reflect on your quest**

✔ How can you use portable devices with your curriculum? ✔ How will teaching and learning improve with these devices? ✔ Do their benefits justify the price? ✔ Can kids use them easily?

MEETING THE STANDARDS

This Tech Quest addresses ISTE standard B.7: Identify computer and related technology resources for facilitating lifelong learning and emerging roles of the learner and the educator.