

Appleby College scores first by integrating technology into curriculum

Use of laptop computers keep students wired-in

By Nancy Alexander
SPECIAL TO THE BEAVER

On the surface they look like ordinary, sturdy, navy blue backpacks. Closer inspection, however, reveals a compartment designed specifically to house a \$4,000 lap top computer.

Welcome to the wired world of the Appleby College student.

As classes resumed this September, Appleby College in Oakville became the first high school in Canada to fully integrate technology into the curriculum.

That means every student and teacher is now equipped with his or her own IBM Think Pad. In turn, every desk in every classroom has a port for students to plug into and log onto the Appleby network which has full Internet, Intranet and e-mail capabilities.

Students have constant access to the Internet for research and also have a new method to communicate with teachers. Every Appleby teacher and student has an e-mail address which allows them to submit assignments, ask questions and communicate during non-class hours.

As with any venture into uncharted territory, Appleby's decision to fully embrace this new technology did not come without its share of controversy or bumps in the road.

Headmaster Guy McLean in fact, has become a bit of an expert on bumps.

McLean says candidly that the new system was "a bit of a nightmare" to set up, not least because there was no how-to manual or "off-the-shelf" solution to guide the way.

"We have 570 kids with passwords and e-mail addresses. Two hundred of those students live on campus and have



Etobicoke. This allows them to interact on or off campus."

McLean says apart from the logistics of wiring the campus and equipping the classrooms, the biggest focus was on doing the professional development necessary to help the teachers feel comfortable and confident with the material.

His advice to any school or school board considering the move to a high-tech classroom is to place great emphasis on staff training and development.

"Above all, there has to be substance. You don't want to throw out good the good things just to make room for the technology."

At Appleby, they have tried to structure their curriculum so that the technology fits into the program naturally. Instead of having a specific computer studies course, for instance, students are required to learn a particular set of computer skills as an integral part of a math or geography course.

McLean says Appleby has been forced to examine how technology actually changes learning. Take the library, for instance.

"What is a library in our setting?", he asks. "Is it a place of quiet repose? Do we need stacks? Is it a place that promotes enriched literature programs? We're under a lot of pressure to find solutions to these questions."

"We want to remain a liberal arts school in terms of our program, but with a technical balance, but the trick is finding the balance without giving up too much."

Among the students who were part of last year's pilot project, the assessment is mostly positive. The biggest surprise, coming from the computer generation, is

that there were a number of students who didn't feel comfortable with the move to technology.

Nadja Freeman, a senior, was one of the reluctant ones. She admits there were some up and downs at first, but says the teachers were very helpful as well as other students who felt more at home with computers.

Nadja says that while computers can never replace teachers or books, she has come to view them as a valuable aid, both in the classroom and as a research tool. She has also learned that they can be addictive.

"You can waste a lot of time if you're not careful. You have to teach yourself when enough is enough. It teaches you self-discipline which is good for university."

Two of her classmates, Jim Baillie and Mark Lee both liked the idea of the high-tech approach from the start. Lee feels it will give him "a head start in a computer-generated world".

Baillie said the first year of the program was "a bit shaky" with some teachers seemingly not sure of how to incorporate the technology into their programs. This year, he says, the system is running much more smoothly and he likes the fact he can access his teachers, even after class hours.

The biggest reservations about the new technology have been expressed by parents.

McLean says there have been parental concerns about whether there is a need for so much technology so early in their child's education, and what it is doing to the curriculum.

"This is an issue we're trying to address," says McLean.

Appleby students Mark Lee, Nadja Freeman and Jim Baillie with teacher Tracey Duldhardt: using technology to its full advantage in learning environment.

Photo by Peter C. McCusker



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McLean talks fast, and you get the feeling he's had to think even faster to work out the logistics of this massive undertaking.

Once the decision had been made to go forward, Appleby launched a pilot project last year involving all of its Grade 9 to 11 students. This year, the entire school, Grades 7 to OAC, is fully integrated into the technology.

McLean admits the decision to take the school in this direction was not without doubters, primarily among parents. Still, he feels his students will benefit greatly from the enhanced computer literacy.

"Technology and the ability to use it effectively is increasingly important in people's lives," he notes. "We wanted our graduates to be competent and not fearful of it. Also, there was this knowledge that a lot of our students we're already going home to lap tops and we wanted to give them more opportunities to work with the technology at school and be able to travel with it.

"For instance, we might have a student who lives on campus, but his lab partner might live in

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