

'IT'S PASSION-BASED LEARNING'



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Classroom tools include iPads, tablets and cellphone cameras for Beverley Acres Grade 7 students (clockwise) Sarah Karim, Daria Karpenko, Alex Ryzer, Parsa Bagheri and Emmanuelle Messeroux.

BY KIM ZARZOUR
kzarzour@yrmg.com

It's the calm before the storm, a chance to observe one of York Region's most innovative classrooms before the hurly-burly arrival of 27 fresh-from-recess pre-teens.

There's the usual classroom wall decor: a poster on respect, a whiteboard, an analogue clock. And there's the unusual.

"Expand, not escape," one bulletin-board poster advises.

"Think before you post," suggests another. "PIDs may only be used when Mr. Lee is here."

There's no front of the class with a teacher's desk — instead, it's tucked in a corner like a forgotten relic. In another corner, an iPod docking station spews tentacles of cords.

The students arrive with the usual jostling and joshing, but instead of plopping at desks and pulling out notebooks, they gather at round tables with laptops, iPads and smartphones.

Instead of the usual teacher's "Class, class, CLASS!", there's "Anyone in Buzz already can comment on the back channel".

Students begin tapping on handhelds as a classmate's video appears on a big screen on the wall. There's a hum in the air as they bat around ideas with keyboards and conversation.

Welcome to learning in the 21st century. This is Beverley Acres Public School in Richmond Hill, one of several in the region garnering international attention for its use of handheld technology.

Grade 7 English teacher Royan Lee is a trailblazer in electronic education and he is used to visitors. Part of his job with the public school board's Literacy@School program is to open his classroom and share his growing expertise about how the NetGeneration learns.

His students are used to it, too. They consider themselves lucky.

"At first, I had to pinch myself to be sure I wasn't dreaming," Edgar Sarkisian recalls on learning he could bring handhelds to class.

Joshua Levine, who once thought school was boring, now concedes it's cool. "I wake up and say to myself, 'Yes, we have English today!'"

CONNECTING GEN-Z

A seven-part series on how today's children are learning in new ways.

It's not the chance to play with high-tech toys that's exciting, they say, it's the opportunity to express themselves in a way that feels comfortable.

"Sometimes educators are blinded by the fact that these are toys, but for these kids, the novelty is over," Mr. Lee says.

That, he says, is when learning begins.

Today's lesson: public speaking. Instead of cue cards and podiums, it's video-recorders on handhelds.

As the students work in small groups, Mr. Lee circulates, often crouching between chairs at their eye level. Students are standing, sitting on chairs and the floor or pacing and talking animatedly.

A few binders and pencil cases sit in tidy piles on the table, irrelevant.

Once the work's done, it's time to discuss. Some students raise their hands, others type on the big screen's back channel.

This back channel is a big bonus of the technology, Mr. Lee says. "Students thrive on feedback — their own self-assessment, along with that of their peers and the teacher."

It also lets him see who is having trouble with the lesson.

"In a traditional classroom, you get the same kids all the time waiting to answer questions. This way I hear from everyone, even those too shy to raise their hands."

The next class that files through the door is different — focused and quiet as students type feedback on classmates' blogs.

THE SERIES

▶ **JAN. 15, PART 1:** Introduction to the e-revolution taking place in our schools

▶ **JAN. 22, PART 2:** Students at Beverley Acres P.S. use handhelds in class

▶ **JAN. 29, PART 3:** Keswick primary students spend their days with iPads and iPods

▶ **FEB. 5, PART 4:** Some high schools toss the paper, take up videogames to learn

▶ **FEB. 12, PART 5:** Digital tools help special ed students

▶ **FEB. 19, PART 6:** Controversies and Challenges: Debate over distractions, dangers

▶ **FEB. 26, PART 7:** Where do we go from here? Who will pay for it all?

Visit www.yorkregion.com for more comments.

Their "learning target" is to recount events, connect them to a big idea and justify their perspective on a text they've read. Their second drafts make use of the feedback.

Some comment orally, some by text, some post on the big screen for all to see.

Throughout both classes, students are looking over shoulders and sharing each other's screens, some discussing, others doing the equivalent of doodling digitally.

The scene wouldn't sit well with adults used to the orderly, authoritarian classroom.

"You have to release control," Mr. Lee says. "There's a certain amount of trust. If you want 100-per-cent control all the time, then perhaps this technology is not the way to go."

Parent Sandra Petrucci is convinced it is: "It might take 10 to 20 years to get the entire school system on board, but I have faith in it. Someone has to be the pioneer."

She says there was some resistance among

parents worried about neglecting "the basics".

"Most parents are in their 40s and set in their ways and there may also be resistance from immigrant groups with a different approach, those who are used to discipline."

But so far, she says, the results are "amazing". "It's not just a teacher up there nattering at you for hours. You get through to the main idea faster because the technology is at your fingertips ... Kids' brains nowadays are so sharp, they pick up things so fast."

While her daughter loves the class, boys especially take to the colour, sound and graphics of doing things digital.

"We aren't forgoing the basics, we still teach grammar, but kids aren't bogged down."

Mr. Lee agrees. "It doesn't replace good teaching. It's a way to improve it. They can pursue interests. It's passion-based learning."

Like other Literacy@School teachers, he is learning as he goes, dealing with issues such as equity (they share the school's 10 iPads and eight iPods, while others have their own) and internet safety.

Students follow three Ps — privacy, no photographs, no personal information — and learn "digital citizenship" skills, but he is glad when mistakes are made because it's a chance for discussion and critical thinking.

He's come to know students better connecting digitally than through traditional teaching.

"The world has changed. We don't teach in a vacuum. It's more challenging for a teacher, but it's exciting, too."

WHAT THE KIDS SAY:

"Blogging and sharing your work with other students is way more fun. I always hope Mr. Royson assigns homework and I check the website to see what's next."

- Pegah Mortazavian, student

"Sometimes the teachers learn from us, because we know stuff they don't know."

- Lauren Russell, student



MARKHAMSPRING
HOMESHOW

March 18th, 19th & 20th 2011
Markham Fairgrounds (McCowan & Elgin Mills)

Admission Prices

\$3 adults • \$2 seniors • Children & Parking FREE!

905.294.2200

**Over 100
Exhibitors,
Guest Speakers
& How-To Demos**