

LEARNING: Pens, papers, textbooks conspicuously absent in some high schools

# NO MORE PAPER, NO MORE BOOKS

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"How many think history is boring?"

The classroom of Grade 11 students erupted in groans and rolling of eyes, but history teacher Mark Melnyk, who had posed the question at the beginning of the school year, wasn't surprised. He, too, remembers lackluster lectures and monotonous memorization.

But this Markville Secondary School teacher had something else up his sleeve.

And today, in his second-floor classroom, boredom is noticeably absent.

Absent, too, are the normal tools of learning — pens, paper, textbooks. The backpacks are left unopened on the floor.

Not absent: student interest. The room buzzes with passionate discourse as 30 students form opinions about whether the wartime Armenian massacres were genocide.

This is the genocide and crimes against humanity class. The six history teachers chose to go "paperless" — one of several approaches high schools are taking to adapt to 21st-century technology. Others require students to bring laptops or are incorporating the latest design software or video games and programs.

In a world of Twitter-fuelled Middle Eastern uprisings and texting TTC drivers nabbed by cellphone images, more and more educators believe "head-in-sand" schooling does a disservice to today's youth. Instead, they are bringing lessons into their digital world.

At Markville, students cluster around round tables talking — some more than others — but no one seems to be goofing off. That's because Mr. Melnyk has made it clear that in 30 minutes, they must produce something to debate in front of the class. And they do produce: arguments bolstered with computer-generated



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Newmarket Dr. J. M. Denison High School student Sarah Shruiff videotapes her Grade 12 peer tutoring classmates working on their laptops. More high schools are encouraging computer use in class and pitching paper, pens and textbooks.

ated research posted on the Smart board. Those who disagree quickly call up supporting quotes and documents on computers.

The discussion leads the students to question if the predominance of pro-Armenian information on the Internet is a symptom of Western bias or its domination of the web.

As they toss back and forth a dizzying array of facts and rebuttals, the bell rings, signalling the end of class. No one leaps up to leave.

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— memorizing dates and names  
— is, well, history.*

"Time to finish up now, OK?" says their teacher, pointing to the clock. "Class? Time to go." The students exit at a snail's pace, continuing the debate in the hallway.

"I can't imagine doing a history course any other way," Nikita Wallia, 16, says, later.

The Markham student has ongoing discussions with her parents about the way digital technology has replaced paper and books and her backpack is strangely empty.

"They don't take it seriously. They don't see it as homework. They're not sure it's legit."

But she believes her grades prove it; they have gone up this year.

Her dad sees one benefit — he's enjoying her new confidence in kitchen-table debates.

Three years ago, Markville's history depart-

ment pitched the paper and dove into digital.

Each of the department's 12 courses has its own website, with all course material online. Lectures are shortened and broken up with YouTube clips and guest speakers, and projects are tailored to the learner, using tools such as videos and Photoshop.

Essays, tests, even exams are done on-computer, marks tabulated and ready to be handed out as they leave the exam room.

"It's hyper-efficient ... and their marks are better than when they're tested on paper," says Mr. Melnyk, head of the department.

That old approach to history — memorizing dates and names — is, well, history. After all, Mr. Melnyk says, if they ever need to know details such as when Sir John A. MacDonald was born, they can grab the answer in seconds from the computer. What's more important to know is why he made the decisions he did.

Colleague Rich MacPherson is exploring other ways to use technology at his Newmarket high school, Dr. J. M. Denison. There, digital devices provide new tools for building language skills in students struggling with text-based communication.

Students use Garageband and iMovie to produce podcasts and movies, special effects and stop-motion photography. Web 2.0 tools such as Bitstrips let them retell Shakespeare through comic strips and video clips and graphic novels help with comprehension.

Senior students try out word games with Grade 9 partners on iPods and iPads and



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report back on which apps work best.

York Region's separate board considers Aurora's St. Maximillian Kolbe — one of the region's newest schools — its showplace for 21st-century learning.

Students use software to design kitchens and create audio-visual equipment they can build. Hospitality students research recipes and nutrition online before creating menus.

In transportation technology class, computers research automobile components and car troubles are diagnosed with a sophisticated \$10,000 scan tool laboratory scope.

The idea, says principal Domenic Scuglia, is to integrate modern technology through the school day and allow students to explore options with the tools of their generation.

But few students bring laptops to class and they can't access Wi Fi because of security concerns. Yet other schools, such as Sir William Mulock Secondary in Newmarket, St. Augustine Catholic in Unionville and St. Andrew's College in Aurora, have pushed the digital envelope even further: students rely on laptops and access to the Internet.

Tyler Samuels, 15, a student at Markville, thinks it's all good.

"We get information so fast these days ... I don't think some people in higher positions realize that."

It's time, he says, to forget standardized tests and forcing students to listen while a teacher drones on. "If you want a new generation of smarter people, you should make the effort to see what technology can do."

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