Seven things to try with one-to-one laptops

By Ruth Buchanan

While every Year 9 student will be receiving a laptop this year, the issue of the same computer to teaching staff is taking place in several rollouts. In my school, just over a third of the teaching staff received a laptop in the first rollout, and at the time of writing, the date of the next teacher laptop rollout is not known. The rollout to all teachers may take several years. The installation of wireless access at school is also being done in stages, so only some classrooms have wireless internet access at this point in time.

The situation created is thus one where there are inevitably classrooms where the students are equipped with a laptop and the teachers are not. It is not only a question of the hardware, but also the software: the NSW DET laptop comes with an extensive range of software – large suites such as Microsoft Office 2007 and Adobe programs, as well as a range of other software, some freeware, some not. The suites are now available for sale from the DET for staff to purchase, but even so, it cannot be assumed that every teacher owns a laptop of their own to bring to class, and this does not solve the situation with the other software. In time, every teacher will have a DER laptop: but right now, they don't. There are plans to install the Office 2007 and Adobe suites on the school's network, so that they are accessible to all staff, but right now, they aren't. While most if not all would be familiar with Office 2003, there are a number of significant changes in the setup of Office 2007. OneNote, however ubiquitous it is predicted to become as a learning tool, is new to most, and fewer would be likely to be familiar with the Adobe programs.

In my school, with our date for the student rollouts imminent, I thought about the situation we faced. The twenty-seven teachers with DER laptops had had a term to explore them and become familiar with the software. The rest of the staff have computer knowledge and experience that likely reflects any high school – from geek fascination to the other end of the technological spectrum. The Year 9 students, about to receive their laptops, would be champing at the bit to use them in class.

In my years of teaching, I've also noticed, over and over again, that it's unwise to assume that students have general technological familiarity. As is the case with many fields of endeavour, most learn what they wish to learn or need to use, however wide or – more likely – narrow the scope of that may be: so while they may be fluent in the operation of MySpace, quick as a wink with MSN or playing a YouTube clip, they may not be nearly as skilled in efficient searching. They may know how to save files, but not have given any thought or time to organising these. One of the great shifts, which becomes possible with an individual laptop, is that more can be stored digitally; less needs to be printed. I've seen a lot of messy exercise books, and plenty of disorganised student USB file lists, too. Although our students have had access to a DET email address for quite some time, I still come across those who have never used it or are not sure how to access it, or who don't know how to attach a file to an email. This year it's Year 9; next year another rollout and so it will go for at least four years, and four rollouts, until two thirds of our high school students will arrive in class with a laptop. We need strategies and plans to manage these changes.

Any teacher, whether technologically fascinated or technologically challenged, still brings to their classroom their experience as a teacher and learner; not just content knowledge, but their skills in the information process. We are not replaced by a computer, but now have the resource of an additional tool which offers many opportunities. With the software to hand for every student, tasks can be set requiring students to use it. With no need to queue to access an internet computer at school, email becomes a fair option. For example – work can be submitted electronically.

In this context, I was approached by a colleague who asked me for ideas for her Year 9 class and their brand new laptops. From this, I devised my list of seven things, which I presented at a school staff meeting. It started as seven things to try in the first week of laptops, but could easily take longer, depending on the teacher's program with a particular class. Its focus was activities that did not (bar one – I wanted to highlight the existence/possibilities of OneNote) depend on the teacher her/himself having a DER laptop – since the

majority didn't. I didn't have one, so I hadn't yet had the opportunity to become familiar with the software on it, whether general or subject-specific. My list of seven things therefore focused instead on familiar applications and achievable ideas and was not subject-specific, so that any teacher could feel comfortable about taking these next steps made possible by the new technology. The list also directs the students' energy and enthusiasm into productive paths, practising using the laptop as a learning tool (even though in their own time their focus was more likely to be on games/fun stuff).

Teachers teach in so many different ways, in the charming individuality of our profession and ourselves, but while the way in which we run our classroom can vary so widely, few of us regularly feel happy with uncertainty dogging our steps as we teach. If colleagues said to themselves, *of course!* I was just as happy as if they'd said, *aha!* – either one implies confidence rather than uncertainty. Small steps, taken with confidence, lead to more steps and greater confidence, and the outcomes therefore are likely to be promising and productive for the teachers and for their students. The final point, students as explorers, has great scope for engaging them and making teacher and class learners from each other, learners together, in line with the way our classrooms are changing.

The feedback I've had from my own school colleagues has taken several angles, and all (but one) has been positive (always interesting to learn from the one, isn't it?). For some, it became a checklist to tick off with their class in the first week. For others, a springboard, prompting them to related ideas, new ideas, new possibilities. In presenting the list at the staff meeting, I emphasised the fact that it was for everyone, not just the laptop-equipped teachers; I also made it available to staff on the school network, for later review/reference in each teacher's own time and at their convenience. Following up a request, I also prepared a document on how to set up an email distribution list (see #1) and staff have advised that this was most helpful too. There are likely other such support documents that could be prepared, but my purpose with this initial list was a single page, seven points, as a starter.

Knowing that many schools were facing the same challenges in relation to the laptops, I shared my list with teacher-librarian colleagues through NSWTL and OZTL. The feedback from these has also been very positive, teacher-librarians using the list themselves and giving it to their computer coordinators and other colleagues, who have welcomed it as a useful, practical document.

I was also invited to share it through this SLAV avenue, and am glad to do so. Please remember that I cannot be familiar with every school system's laptop program, and there are a couple of points which you may need to adapt to reflect your own (e.g. the way in which your system offers backing up: the DET's laptops have a 2GB folder called My Locker that is backed up at school each day, while the rest of the hard drive is the student's responsibility to back up).

It's general enough to be of general relevance, and I hope you find it useful at your school in working with your students in this time of change and opportunity. (If you adapt this to your own school/system, please acknowledge the source on your version).

Seven things to try with Year 9 laptops, Week One

by Ruth Buchanan

1. Set up an email distribution list for your Year 9 class and send them an email.
Idea: Don't tell them you've sent it but have a reward for the first ten students to reply.
Why?
Gets you organised so it's easy to send them emails, and they have your email address.
Establishes and encourages email as a means of communication to send/receive work.

2. Get your students to set up folders for your subject's work on their laptop: one in My Locker (in My Computer) which is backed up at school, one in Documents that is not (they can also back up files from Documents on their own USB or external hard drive at home if they want to).
Idea: If you set standardised foldering for your subject, it's easier for you to say, save this file to this particular folder and for students to then locate it efficiently. Suggestion: main folder with subject name, then subfolders

as suits your subject – by topic (eg. Human Body, Drugs) or type (e.g. Practical Work, Theory Work). You will need to think about the structure that will work best for you and your students.
Why?
Getting students organised now means it's easy to save and find work later.

3. Do a simple word-processing task in class
Idea: Once they've completed their writing, get them to save a second version and use highlighting/different colours etc to focus on main points
Why?
Uses a familiar application on this new computer, so students can easily go to this again.
Encourages students to keep notes/work on the laptop rather than a workbook.
Encourages students to explore the options which this offers (e.g. colouring text) that are different to pen/paper.

4. Have your students do a research task using the internet in a wireless-connected area of the school
Idea: set up clear goal/questions and a specific site or site list for this task. You could email the task to them, too.
Why?
Gives every student the chance to connect to the internet on their laptop and use it for an educational purpose.

5. Do a simple task (e.g. word processing) and have students email it to you as an attachment by a due date
Idea: get them in the habit of putting a subject line that helps you quickly identify what an email is about e.g. the name of the task. Students don't always use subject lines.
Why?
Encourages students to submit work electronically (saving paper/printing/trees).
Checks that all your students know how to attach a file to an email.

6. Get your students to set up a notebook in OneNote (MS Office 2007) for your subject, then establish sections for the topics you will be doing next term.
Idea: Do some simple work on one page – some text, copying an item (e.g. a picture) from elsewhere.
Why?
OneNote has huge potential for being your students' digital notebook. Showing them how to get organised now, and get started with a program they may not have seen before, encourages better work practices.
Saves time for you and them, now and later.

7. Use your students as explorers: ask your students to explore the software and come up with five ways to use the laptop and its software in your subject area, and email their ideas/findings/suggestions to you by a due date.

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