Blazing Tablets: Teaching and Learning in a Paperless/Wireless Environment

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Abstract. In Fall 2004, Dakota State University freshmen and sophomore students were required to use tabletPCs (wireless laptops with digital inking functionality). The library and composition faculty will discuss their teaching experiences and will describe innovative practices in teaching and assessment in this wireless/paperless learning environment.

From the library faculty.

We discovered several advantages in using WebCT and Tablet PCs.
- Tablet PCs allowed us to turn a room with tables into a tablet classroom, thereby freeing up more hours in a lab for open access by DSU students.
- The tablets provided students and us with greater mobility in the library. In activities that require the use of tables in an area where we have no computer projector or computers, students continue to have access to electronic course materials and library resources.
- Group work was easier to facilitate and more effective because the Tablet PCs allowed us to move instruction out of the Library Lab and into a room where there were tables (for ENGL 101) or to a table area of the library (for ENGL 201). Students appeared more engaged in group processes in a table environment than they had been in the Library Lab.
- WebCT greatly reduced the number of paper handouts, so we cut the associated costs of labor, printing, and paper.
- WebCT’s quizzing and automatic grading capabilities provide us with an efficient way to assess information literacy for all students in these courses. Immediate grading is especially crucial since we are dealing with large numbers of students and need to deliver scores to faculty quickly for their use.

We did face some challenges.
- Some students deleted the library course from their WebCT course lists, because they did not sign up for it and did not realize that they would need it. We had to identify who was without access and reactivate their access to the course.
- Because all students in ENGL 101 were in a single library course in WebCT and all ENGL 201 students were in a single library course, it took us extra time to differentiate one section from another when grading and compiling quiz answers and scores. We obtained current class lists from faculty and then manually sorted individual answers and scores into spreadsheets as needed.
- Placing handouts and activities on WebCT drew students away from the library's website and resources rather than toward it.

Library faculty have move away from WebCT.
- Rather than have students find support documents in a course WebCT space, we want them to know where to find support documents any time they need them -- on the Library website.
- By placing our material on the library website instead of on WebCT, faculty can put links to library subject guides and resources within their own WebCT courses without having to deal with additional access issues for students.
- Choosing to not use WebCT saves E-Education Services staff from loading all ENGL 101 and 201 students into additional library WebCT courses.
- Because the handouts and other materials remain in electronic form on the library website, the paper and printing savings of WebCT and the tablets are preserved.
From the Composition Faculty.

Advantages of Tablets and WebCT
- Paperless assignments and submissions
- Easy mark-up
- Easy comments (macros are wonderful!)
- Papers are not lost
- Assignments always available
- Consistent access to the internet
- Availability of resources (library, internet, files)
- Spontaneity
- Discussion board
- Video and audio capabilities

Challenges
- Learning students’ names
- Keeping students focused on the task
- Creating useful learning tasks that take advantage of the technology
- Not letting the technology drive the curriculum
- Time in downloading and uploading files
- Technological failure at inopportune times

Adapted methods and techniques
- Peer review
- Assignments and quizzes on WebCT
- Electronic discussions
- Research Notebooks
- Presentations (both faculty and student)
- Course delivery (some faculty use no textbooks—only the internet resources)

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