Techno-teaching: The future of the classroom

As the use of technology becomes more prominent at Laurier, **The Cord** looks at whether it is an asset or a problem for learning in a university environment

KARI PRITCHARD
FEATURES EDITOR
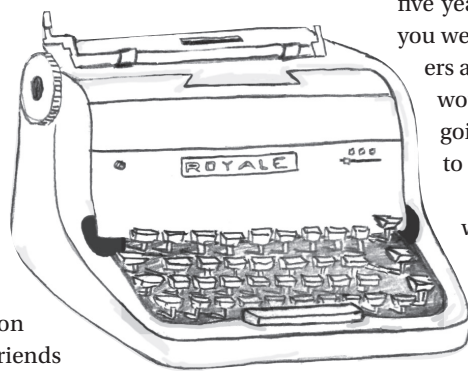
The changing classroom

In a world of ever-increasing scientific advancements, it can no longer be denied that we are a generation embracing technology. As students, we often observe uses of technology in class that our professors don't see: creeping on Facebook, playing Sudoku and taking notes on your laptop all at the same time; texting our friends about what is going on over the weekend; listening to an iPod instead of the lecture. As much as students might love hi-tech gizmos, how much are these technological gadgets helping or hindering our learning and what role will they play in our future at Laurier?

Communications Studies Professor Darren Wershler reminisces about his experience in university when he "was still lugging around a portable typewriter."

"I didn't get my first computer until I started my Master's degree in 1988," said Wershler, highlighting the fact that we as students may take our technological advancements for granted.

Professor of Communication Studies Matthew Tiessen emphasized this point by drawing on his experiences in '94 with the ever-popular laptop at the University of Waterloo: "the odd time you'd see a really dorky guy with a laptop at the front of the class or something, like a big clunky laptop, but not often. And people sort of shunned them like a weirdo."

Compared to the past five years, technology has never been as prominent at Laurier as it is today. Andrew Harris of Information Technology Services (ITS) remembers that when he attended Laurier five years ago, if you were into technology you were the go-to person to hook up routers and other gadgets. "Five years ago we wouldn't have thought everyone was going to have iPod Touches connecting to our wireless network," added Harris.

Co-worker Melanie More-Duckworth agreed with Harris' point: "It's amazing, the increase [of technology on campus] is tremendous and the students seem to be more technologically savvy." More-Duckworth is also the training and education coordinator for ITS and thus notices that it's not just students increasing their use of technology as features like PowerPoint and video capture are used more frequently by faculty.

And of course there are learning tools such as distance education. Sandy Hughes, director of teaching support services, notes that online learning is constantly growing, on average about twelve or fifteen percent a year in enrolment.

"Twenty years ago when I started here, about ninety percent of part-time students took distance ed. courses and about ten percent of them were full-time students, and now we're almost eighty percent full-time students and the rest of the students would be part-time," added Hughes.

Disadvantages of advanced technology

Technology is here and there is no denying the use of it. But what are some of the disadvantages for students and teachers alike when faced by the ever-increasing popularization of technology?

In regards to online learning, Lisa Fanjoy, the manager of online learning and continuing education, thinks that when it comes to technologically focused institutions like distance education "you have to be a motivated learner."

"You don't want to be too inclined to procrastinate," added Fanjoy. "If you can't motivate yourself without that structured classroom setting, you might struggle a little bit."

Harris pointed out that in terms of technology, "people rely on it a bit too much sometimes. People might get a bit lazy, download their lectures online, don't go to class ... you lose that sense of community when a lot of the stuff is online."

Similarly, English and Film Studies Professor Andrea Austin brings up the downside of using visual materials like Powerpoint in class settings, saying that it encourages "lazy note taking."

"[It] is degrading students' aural skills, and they're not learning how to listen and process data aurally."

From a different angle, More-Duckworth said that "because [technology] is so accessible, you sometimes lose the challenge of getting into the library and finding the book that you need if it's all online."

"One of the problems is the effect that technology has on research culture because it's very easy to sit down and open Google and whack your essay topic into it and expect that to provide you definitively with all the answers," said Wershler, adding to the concerns highlighted by More-Duckworth.

Something that professors do notice is the level of student awareness in class. "I made the joke when I started the term that really I should be teaching from the back of the room in order to keep tabs on all the screens and stuff that the students are using," said Tiessen.

"Just since wireless came into the classroom, I've seen a big difference in quality of the work I get and I think that it's not everybody, but there's a proportion of students who are not really taking notes," said Austin, adding that she has had students admit to playing *World of Warcraft* during class before.

In a more comical light, Tiessen suggested that, "The laptops strike me as the new version of hiding your dirty magazine behind your textbook ... as a teacher at the front, the kids are typing like crazy and you know you're not as interesting as how much they're typing; it's obvious they're on Facebook." As Tiessen is also a tutorial leader sitting in the audience for some classes, he has been witness to these "dirty acts" firsthand.
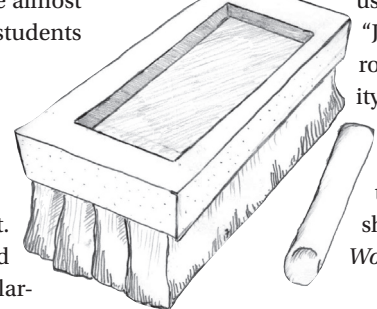
Helpful hi-tech

Although technology can sometimes be a distraction from learning or proper researching, it also can be helpful for students and professors who use it in the right ways.

Distance education is able to expand learning off-campus. "A lot of the courses that we develop are courses where they fill up in classrooms and students can't get the courses," said Hughes of online learning.
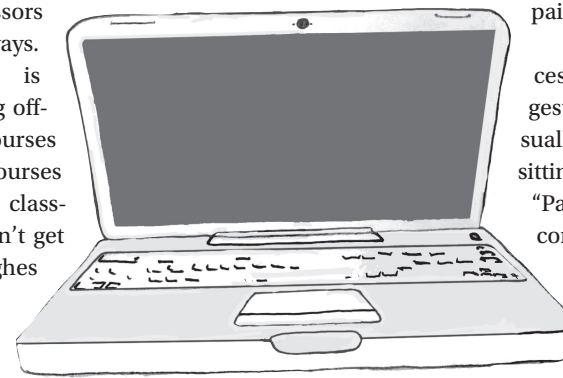
"Students on co-op term over in Europe or wherever can pick up an elective or two over the summer or any student can pick up an elective or two that they need over the summer, so it just frees up their schedule a bit for the fall and winter," said Fanjoy of summer courses, when fifty percent of registration for online learning takes place.

On campus, Austin pointed out that "I think because we can teach large courses with technology, we now have them. Whereas a course of four hundred students in first year at a university the size of Laurier wouldn't have been doable twenty years ago."

"I think that that does change the first-year experience for students quite a bit when they're in these huge classes instead of smaller classes and it's because the technology has made those classes possible."

Technology in the classroom has given Wershler higher expectations for his students. "If I have a room full of students with live Internet connections on their iPhones and their Blackberries and their laptops, nobody gets to say 'I don't know.' Go and look it up, you have an entire world of information at your disposal, get off your ass and do some research."

Tiessen takes advantage of new technological possibilities when teaching: his entire course is online. Students download all of their readings – there is no textbook.

Expanding on Tiessen's notion that technology helps create accessibility, Harris expressed that technology helps people at Laurier with disabilities. "We have the accessible learning lab where people with hearing impairments or visual impairments [use] technology [to] help that."

Technology also creates the possibility of accessibility to different learning styles, as Fanjoy suggests, "some students who like to learn by reading visually, they find [online courses] better suit them than sitting in a classroom and listening."

"Part of its great appeal, of course, is you can sit at your computer at two o'clock in the morning and get caught up on your course notes and maybe post some chat topics, work on your paper," said Fanjoy of another benefit of online learning for those with different working schedules.
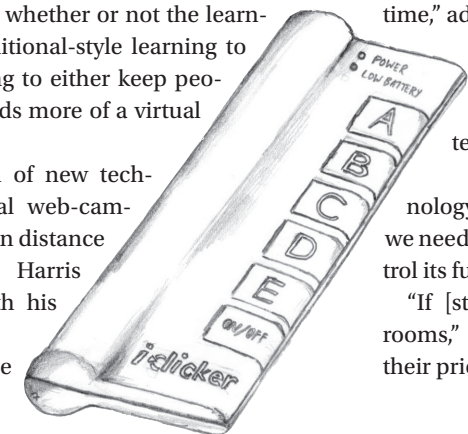
The way ahead

It has been demonstrated that technological advancements have their fair share of ups and downs, but technology is not going to fade away now and it is time to consider its use in the future of schooling.

"In the next five, ten years it will be a balance between technology in the classroom and whether or not the learning is going to go from traditional-style learning to podcasts," says Harris, "trying to either keep people in classes or move towards more of a virtual classroom."

Through the introduction of new technologies like Wimba, virtual web-cam-like applications being used in distance education courses already, Harris may not be too far off with his predictions.

"We're trying to encourage the developers to use more synchronized technologies, so we've got a web casting option that's available to them now," said Hughes.

"[Technology] has proven to be very beneficial in language courses. German uses the Wimba sessions so the instructors can hear the students' pronunciation," added Fanjoy.

Wershler is also looking to get a media lab built at Laurier. "The idea would be to create a room where everyone has a constant, instantaneous, high-speed network access ... what I want is a space that allows for the best kinds of things that can come out of collaborative uses of computing."

What is also evident is that in our use of technology, as Austin suggested, "we just have to approach it with a critical lens."
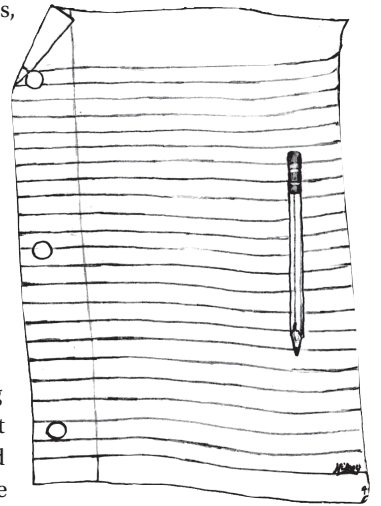
"I think it needs to be used judiciously, carefully. Is it really advancing things?" asked Tiessen.

"Technology has no 'off switch,' once it's there you can't get rid of it and pretending to do so would be a waste of everybody's time," added Wershler.

"What the university has to figure out is what it wants those practices to be and how it's going to make the best use of the technology that's available because the technology itself is not going to go away."

If we as students embrace and support the use of technology as a teaching aid, rather than as a teaching hindrance, we need to be aware that we are the people who potentially control its future use at Laurier.

"If [students] want cutting-edge technology in the classrooms," said Wershler, "they have to make it clear that that's their priority."