Technology In the Out-of-School Environment

by Judi Wolf

The use of the technologies available now for learners will be in large part determined by the extent of its availability within the physical space of any educational or social program for children. Fortunately, more and more schools and community sites have acquired not only computers, but also the connectivity to the Internet and other tools such as printers, scanners, and digital cameras. If a program is lucky enough to have access to Internet-capable computers, the children in that program can benefit enormously if directed to web sites that will motivate and provide an interactive learning environment. If a program has computers that are not Internet capable, then software programs can provide the same value.

Whatever equipment may be available to the children in a program, the benefits gained from using this technology will be dependent on exactly *how* it is used. Children who go to the computers to "play" have no way of distinguishing the computer from a video game at home. However, children who are directed to go to the computer with a task to complete, a skill to develop, research to be done, or concepts to practice, will "see" the computer as the learning tool that it should be for them.

The same motivational impact that makes the computer such a desirable learning tool can also lead to the problem of too many children and too few computers. As with all sharing situations, a system must be put into place for rotating children's computer use, with time limits set to accommodate each child. Two children working on one computer often works very well if an established "sharing agreement" is reached. One that has worked for many classroom teachers is the "Pilot/Co-pilot" system. One of the children working at the computer takes the role of the pilot and is the only one to *touch* the mouse during the session. The other child is involved by using verbal directives to the pilot, such as, "You need to highlight that word before you can change colors. Highlight by holding down the mouse and pulling the curser over the word." The co-pilot is strengthening verbal ability, a needed developmental skill. During the next computer session, or halfway through a timed session, the positions of pilot and co-pilot can be switched. A plan such as this not only can avoid an all out battle over the control of the mouse, but can go a long way to influence behaviors such as cooperation and how children interact with each other.

Now that the Internet is so much a part of our daily lives and definitely a part of the future life of today's children, there are certain aspects of the Internet that children must learn at an early age. One of these things is that, unlike an encyclopedia or a textbook, content from the Internet often has not been reviewed by an editorial staff. Anyone can publish on the Internet and, unfortunately, they can publish false information. Knowing this can ensure that children do not "believe everything they see" on the Internet, a lesson that will serve them well now and in the future.

The second aspect that children should learn is to have a respect for the Internet. Adults can model this respect for the Internet by verbally citing where an image, chart, graph, or information came from if it was taken from the Internet. Children will observe this respect if an adult gives credit to the author or designer of a web site from time to time.

The third aspect of the Internet that children must be aware of is that they must do everything they can to stay safe online. By not revealing information about themselves to anyone online, they will be perfectly

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safe while using the Internet. There are some excellent web sites that have been designed to provide children with activities that encourage online safety. These can be done as a whole group activity or in small groups at the computers.

- PBS Kids, http://pbskids.org, can always be counted on for great web sites, but they do an especially good job with online safety by posing some questions and rewarding children with a printable web license proving their capability for using the Internet safely: http://pbskids.org/license

- The folks at Disney also present online safety for children with Cybernetiquette Comix: http://disney.go.com/cybersafety/

- Coming out of Australia, Netty's World not only encourages children to be safe online, but also provides a child-friendly explanation and tour of the Internet itself: www.nettysworld.com.au/

- Netsmartz is an interactive resource from The Center For Missing and Exploited Children: www.netsmartz.org

- Media Awareness Network is from Canada and provides parents and teachers with many strategies for teaching information literacy, respect for the Internet, and safe surfing ideas: www.media-awareness.ca/
  The Media Awareness Network also has similar game-like teaching tools for the older students, like Jo Cool or Jo Fool: www.media-awareness.ca/english/games/jocool_jofool

- Privacy Playground is designed for 8-10 year children and teaches them how to spot online marketing strategies and to protect their personal identification: www.media-awareness.ca/english/games/privacy_playground

When children have an assignment from school, an avid interest in a topic, or just need to find some information, more and more frequently they go directly to the Internet. Although print material can sometimes satisfy their mission, the 21st century student is finding answers by clicking a mouse. Unfortunately, many students are faced with an overwhelming number of web sites as a result of a "general" search and have no way of selecting the web site that will answer their needs. Fortunately for children, several web sites have been designed with them in mind. There are search engines, specifically for elementary-age children, and the results of their search will yield web sites with age-appropriate content, images, graphs, charts, and diagrams. Having these readily available will help direct students as they attempt to complete an assignment or discover information.

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- Yahooligans, child of Yahoo, one of the first search portals, is much more than a children's search engine. Be sure to look at the wonderful slideshows and news articles for children: www.yahooligans.com

- KidsClick will not only provide child-friendly results, but adds a reading level range for the content on those web sites: http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/KidsClick!/

- The Internet Public Library for Kids allows children to submit questions on a ready-to-use form. Encouraging children to have many ways to discover answers to their questions is very important, and kid-friendly search engines provide new resources for them: www.ipl.org/div/kidspace/

- Fact Monster (www.factmonster.com/) is an online almanac for kids. Children who like statistics and enjoy detailed facts about a sports team, a country, or an animal will love visiting this web site.

All children benefit from additional reading outside of the school day. Using printed material often and hearing stories read to them by adults are tantamount to learning to appreciate literature. In addition to a child's interaction with reading books and hearing stories, the Internet and educational software can provide a multimedia enhanced literacy environment. Often in this environment, not only are the stories animated and read to the child, but they also provide the written text so that a child can follow the words as they are being read. This aids in fluency development. Children delight in listening to and reading along with these stories, and very often they act as a motivation for the reluctant reader to develop their listening skills as well as their reading skills.

- Story Place has stories both in English and Spanish and for the preschool and the elementary

set. The stories are animated with sound and are accompanied by online activities: www.storyplace.org/

- Book Pals Storyline is provided by the Screen Actors Guild Foundation and features actors and actresses reading stories to children. The books are shown to the students as they are read: www.storylineonline.net/

- The Kennedy Center Storyline Online features the story showing the books, but also streamlines the text with the video. This encourages children to read along: www.kennedy-center.org/multimedia/storytimeonline/

- Book Hive Zinger Tales has videos of professional storytellers enthralling children in a dramatic presentation of old and cherished stories: www.bookhive.org/zingertales/zingertales.asp

When children use computer software and the Internet effectively as a learning tool, they benefit from the interactivity for which technology allows. They are not passive learners, they are active in making decisions and getting almost immediate feedback. They usually remain engaged in the learning activity and are gratified by their own success. Technology can provide so much more than just the "drill and practice" sometimes seen in "electronic worksheets." Software such as *KidPix* (Riverdeep), is a draw and paint program whose blank canvas allows a child to create and design. *The Logical Journey of the Zoombinies* (The Learning Company) requires children to use higher level thinking skills to come to logical conclusions. Web sites that provide actual learning activities take the student through the learning process with animation and sound. Students have the ability to manipulate objects which mirrors the "hands on" activities of the classroom. Students can develop skills and concepts across their curriculum subjects as well as address their various interests. Children who find a web site particularly engaging and motivating will develop new interests as they discover new information while exploring the website.

- A Math Dictionary For Kids is an animated, interactive dictionary for students which explains over 500 common mathematical terms in simple language. Children can actually manipulate objects as they gain understanding of the concept: www.amathdictionaryforkids.com/

- National Geographic For Kids is filled with interactive games, activities, and experiments that cover geography, science, and current events from the world of nature: www.nationalgeographic.com/kids/

- Rate Your Plate, www.sp.uconn.edu/~cthompso/, and Dole 5 A Day, www.dole5aday.com/, will instill children with good nutritional values while they are having fun.

- Ben's Guide To U.S. Government For Kids provides interesting information and activities about the U.S. government attractively delivered to children: http://bensguide.gpo.gov/

- The United States Mint For Kids, www.usmint.gov/kids/flashIndex.cfm, and Kids' Bank, www.kidsbank.com/, are two web sites that will help children to not only manage money, but to understand economic concepts.

- The University of Illinois extension program Just For Kids offers some excellent learning resources, including the Great Plant Escape, The Secret Lives of Trees, Let's Talk About Insects, and other topics. All activities are in both English and Spanish: www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/kids/index.html

- The Exploratorium Online activities, covering a wide variety of topics continues to be one of the most visited web sites on the Internet: www.exploratorium.edu/explore/online.html The Exploratorium, housed in The Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, was one of the very first museums to have a presence on the Internet.

- Providing students with opportunities to vicariously travel outside of their physical space, Eduweb, www.eduweb.com/portfolio/adventure.php, has many web-based adventures or Electronic Field Trips, www.efieldtrips.org/, which offer not only virtual flash movies to a location, but discussion forums where children can interact with people who live in that location. Web cameras can also provide a lens to the outside world.

- A good collection of web cameras can be found at the web camera page of the Discovery School web site: http://dsc.discovery.com/cams/cams.html.

Choosing what technologies will be used in a program and how often children will use computers and the Internet should always be influenced by the goals and objectives of the program's curriculum and the needs and learning style of each individual child.

This article has really just "touched the surface" of how technology can enhance the environment of any child care program. There are many ways that children can benefit from the multimedia and interactive aspects of recent technology advances. Choosing what technologies will be used in a program and how often children will use computers and the Internet should always be influenced by the goals and objectives of the program's curriculum and the needs and learning style of each individual child. However, as you begin to explore technology use in your program, be prepared to see reluctant learners engaged in reading about their own high-interest topics and to watch those children who often are easily distracted, focused and engaged in learning and enthusiastically pursuing new skills and developing new ideas.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Pilot/Co-Pilot: Try this one out with two teachers at a computer. As teachers figure out how to work cooperatively together on one computer, they will be gaining insight on how to help school-age children learn this important skill.

Personal Safety on the Internet: Explore the suggested programs (perhaps in the Pilot/Co-Pilot format) to see how they work, what they teach, and whether the information is appropriate for the children in your program.

Software Sources: This author suggests that well-selected software can supplement children's use of technology and may function as a substitute when Internet access is unavailable or unreliable. Appoint a taskforce of teachers to explore which software can fill what specific need or objective. Then, make a plan to acquire the necessary software and put it to use in your program.

This Beginnings Workshop project has been developed in collaboration with Tracey Ballas and School-Age NOTES.

Tracey C. Ballas, Chief Operating Officer for School-Age NOTES, has more than 20 years practical experience in the after-school field. Tracey was one of the founders of the National School-Age Care Alliance (now the National AfterSchool Association) and served as president of that organization for six years. She also co-founded and is a past president of the Ohio Professionals for School-Age Children. She took on ownership and operations of School-Age NOTES after the untimely death of Rich Scofield in July, 2004.

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