

Down-expensing Ed Tech

by John W. Rice

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One of the persistent gripes folks have against educational technology is the amount of money spent on equipment. While it is certainly true some needed technologies will remain expensive, not everything that can be put to effective use in the classroom has to be high-priced. Bearing in mind that school budgets are usually tight, and many teachers wind up buying equipment out of their own pockets, in this month's column I'd like to offer a few suggestions for some inexpensive items that can be useful in the classroom.

An Inexpensive Camcorder

The Digital Blue™ [Movie Creator 2.0](#) is an update on a popular inexpensive video camera from [Digital Blue Corp.](#), an innovative company marketing high tech gadgetry to youth. Version 2.0 of their inexpensive camcorder improves on the specs of the older model. The idea behind the Movie Creator is not to film an entire wedding or graduation ceremony. The idea is to film short clips and quickly get them into a computer for editing. The package comes with a camera, cables, and software, all for under \$100.

Teachers wishing to create and edit digital video clips in their classroom (or better yet, have their students create and edit the clips) will appreciate the low price of the Movie Creator 2.0. The camera acts as both a camcorder and traditional digital camera. Although the resolution does not equal more expensive cameras, still shots can also be taken by the Movie Creator and downloaded into a computer. [Stop action photography](#) has been used in classroom projects for years, and the camera simplifies that method as well. Digital Blue offers a nice [activity guide](#) for students and teachers.

Bear in mind the Movie Creator is no substitute for a more expensive camcorder that records on tape or DVD. However, for quick digital movies in classroom projects, it fills an inexpensive niche.

An Inexpensive Response System

Electronic classroom response [systems](#) are all the rage these days. The systems usually come with remote control pads that send feedback to the teacher's machine wirelessly. Students can answer questions anonymously, and teachers get instant [data](#) and graphics. The idea has fascinated teachers and education professors, and much [research](#) continues in this field.

Full-fledged response systems typically require district support in order to purchase. Some teachers may desire a simpler setup in their classrooms for fast and easy study sessions or for adding a little fun to their class. Fortunately, a solution exists with the [Eggspert](#)™ system by Educational Insight®.

The Eggspert is clearly a response system geared for the younger set, although some older students may enjoy using it, too. The unit comes with six egg-shaped lights, each a different color. Each light is connected to a color-coded response pad. The unit can be configured for different educational activities. In “answer first” mode, students compete to press their buttons first, as in popular quiz shows. Alternatively, the unit can be set to rotate lighting up its eggs, stopping on one at random. The student or groups of students assigned that color must then answer the question or engage in whatever activity the teacher has designed.

As with the Movie Creator, the Eggspert is no substitute for its more robust siblings. For starters, it is wired, although the wires are long and can reach far. Second, it is limited to six students, or six groups of students. Finally, no software can record multiple choice answers. But, for teachers desiring their own simple electronic feedback system, it is typically available for less than \$60 from a variety of retailers.

Inexpensive Ergonomics Improvements

Students working on laptops, either those assigned to them in [one-to-one programs](#) or those working in laptop labs, may complain of typing fatigue due to the angle of the keyboard. A company called [LapWorks®](#) makes a variety of products designed to assist in the positioning of laptops. The Laptop Desk® 2.0 lets users better position laptops for typing, as well as provide a non-skid surface for the machine to sit on (ideal for slippery desktops). The company’s Laptop Legs™ are aftermarket feet for portable computers that can help position the keyboard to a more ergonomically comfortable angle. Both products promote better airflow underneath the machines, improving cooling efficiencies.

These methods of angling the keyboards may be particularly beneficial to younger laptop users. At a price below \$30 for the Laptop Desk, and below \$20 for the Laptop Legs, a lab or classroom can be easily outfitted at reasonable cost.

Inexpensive Flash Drives

Flash drives, also called thumb drives or keychain drives, continue to drop in price to astoundingly low levels. One gig drives are now available for less than \$30 after rebate. The smallest, at 128 kb, have breached the sub-\$10 mark (both prices were seen recently in a [Fry’s Electronics/Outpost.com](#) newspaper flyer).

Flash drives plug into a computer’s USB port. USB compatibility has been part of the Mac and Windows environments for several years now. In the old days, we struggled if a file on a non-networked computer was over the limit of our floppy discs. CD-R drives helped with some of this, but burning a new one each time we wanted to move files was a hassle. Flash drives are the ultimate in convenience, though. Simply plug the drive in, copy the files and remove the drive. Repeat on the other machine and you’re done.

Many programs can run [exclusively](#) from thumb drives, and they’re gaining popularity among students as well as teachers. Some [districts](#) are encouraging the use of flash drives for all students, buying them in bulk to save even more money.

Conclusion

Ed tech products don't have to be expensive to be useful. All the products mentioned here fill a need for under \$100. The next time someone gripes about technology for the classroom costing too much, remind them of the alternatives out there.

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