

Great Gadgets for Technology Teachers

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Texas computer educators are constantly looking for new resources to incorporate into their classroom teaching. This article examines specific technologies which are seeing increasing use throughout the state. Specific product examples with current prices are offered, however in many cases a variety of brand names are available in each category, and they are available for purchase from a larger selection of vendors than the ones mentioned here.

USB Flash Drive

Floppies only hold 1.44 megabytes of data. CD-R discs hold tons more, but it takes time to initiate their software and “burn” them. Then they are rather fragile and don’t make a good choice for quick swapping of files among computers. The solution is the USB flash drive. The smallest come in a memory size of 32 megabytes, or about 20 floppy drives’ worth of information, at less than \$30. These plug into the computer’s USB port and become instant little drives, complete with their own drive letter. Files can be dragged and dropped, then the procedure can be reversed on other computers. For file swapping, the USB flash drive is an absolute necessity. Teachers, lab administrators, and techies alike find them indispensable once they try them out.

An example of something in the \$30 range is the Verbatim Store 'n' Go USB Drive line, which starts at \$29 for the 32 megabyte model, and works with USB 2.0 for fast transfer speeds. Models with higher capacity, up to a gigabyte, are more expensive but allow for quick swapping of larger files.

Digital Video Recorder

No need for VCRs or DVD players when you put video on specially designed hard drives that are about the size of a paperback. Portable video drives can be highly useful to teachers who use video in the classroom. Their dual capabilities allowing them to record from TV sources as well as transfer video to and from PCs make them valuable tools for classrooms seeking to combine video and computer applications.

Archos is a brand name synonymous with handheld hard drives designed to hold thousands of MP3 music files. Since music and movie files can both be digitized, the natural progression was to offer portable hard drives that can serve as video recorders and players. The top of the line model, in the \$500 range, is the Archos AV320 which weighs in at 20 gigabytes. This holds 40 hours of video at the lowest resolution. It has a built in LCD monitor so users can actually look at their videos without any hookups, if desired. The unit plugs into a computer with a USB 2.0 connection, and into a TV with an S-Video or composite connection. Note that in order to record from a TV source, the AV320 will require the additional Archos Digital Video Recorder plug-in, which runs in the \$50-60 range. The Archos AV320 was spotted recently in the low \$500 range at Chumbo.com.

Archos has an older model, the AV120, that can still be found online in the \$350 range. Doing a search on Google's price comparison site, <http://froogle.google.com>, may generate leads for additional places to purchase it.

Palm Tungsten T3

Palm Pilots and other handhelds have long captured the imagination of teachers. The Palm Tungsten T3, however, deserves special mention in the Palm Pilot category. Think of the Tungsten T3 as a Palm on steroids. With nearly half again the screen size of traditional Palm Pilots when fully stretched in landscape mode, 64 megs of RAM, voice memo capabilities, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint file creation and manipulation, Bluetooth wireless, and infra-red capabilities, the T3 remains the standard to beat in today's handheld market, and comes in at a price around \$399. (Online discounters such as MPSuperStore.com and TriStateCamera.com have it listed under \$340.)

Using a Palm in the classroom for word processing, spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations may well be more viable with this model than previous ones. Additionally, due to its lower price, in the event of damage or loss the financial pain is not nearly so great as it is with a laptop.

Tablet PC

Tablet PCs have loads of benefits for teachers. Besides being notably lighter than other laptops, they offer handwriting capabilities which can be invaluable in the classroom. Hook one up to a projector to get easy diagramming and annotations the whole class can see. Because the screen is not pressure sensitive, tablet PCs make excellent diagramming devices. No more need for transparencies. Even better, since teacher's annotations are digital, they can be easily saved for later use. This makes tablets particularly useful for math and science teachers.

It still runs around \$1500 or more for a decent tablet PC with adequate memory and wireless capabilities. Refurbished Toshiba 3500s were recently spotted in the \$1400 range on TigerDirect.com, and in the \$1200 range on MPSuperStore.com. Note that these models will typically require the purchase of a wireless card if wireless capabilities are desired. For straight tablets, that is with external USB keyboards rather than a directly attached one, prices have fallen to the sub-\$1000 range on models from new players in the arena such as TDV Vision, also available on TigerDirect.com. Little information is available on the quality of the sub-\$1000 models due to their recent introduction, however they are certain to continue pressuring all makers of tablet PCs to lower their prices.

As new products continue to be introduced, teachers continue to find new and innovative uses for them in the classroom. Computer educators in Texas and elsewhere are discovering these gadgets are beneficial for specific applications in the classroom, and find them helpful with integrating technology and meeting portions of the TA TEKS.

Sites:

Online retail:

<http://www.chumbo.com>

<http://www.mpsuperstore.com>

<http://www.tigerdirect.com>

<http://www.tristatecamera.com>

Price Comparison:

<http://froogle.google.com>

Products:

Verbatim USB Drives

http://www.verbatim.com/products/products.cfm?sub_id=48

Archos AV320

http://www.archos.com/products/prw_500542.html

Palm Tungsten T3

<http://www.palmone.com/us/products/handhelds/tungsten-t3/>

Toshiba 3500

<http://www.csd.toshiba.com/>

TDV Vision V800XPT

<http://www.tdvvision.com/DispCatProdList.aspx?CategoryID=25>

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