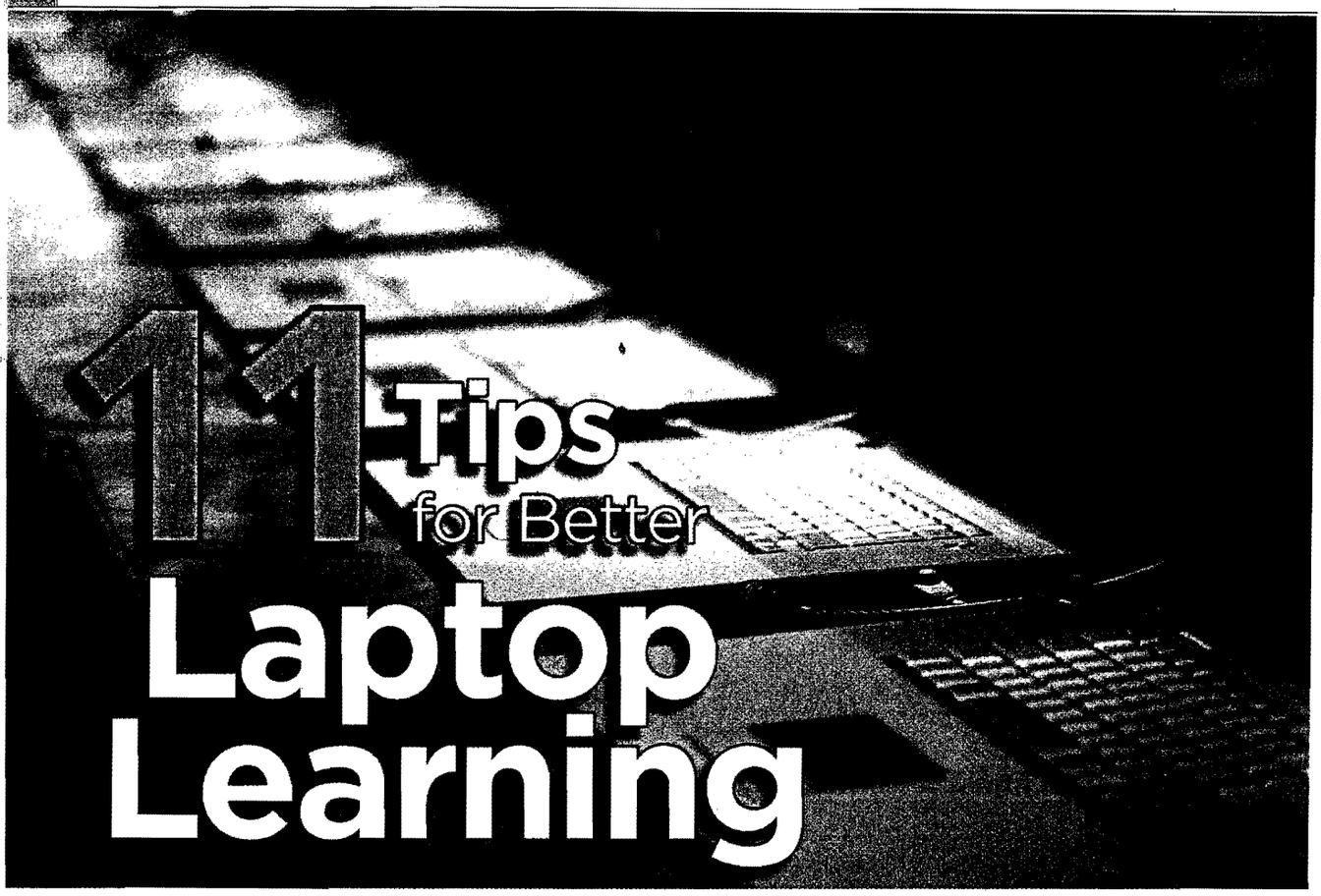

11 Tips for Better Laptop Learning

By Jon Orech

The goal of installing laptop programs is to increase student learning in the classroom. Follow these eleven tips to get the most learning out of your investment.

1 MAKE STUDENTS RESPONSIBLE AND ACCOUNTABLE

Make sure to assign a computer number to each student. That way, mishaps become much easier to trace. Impress upon them the importance of careful treatment of the laptops.

2 MAKE THE ACTIVITIES AUTHENTIC

The research on the importance of creating "authentic, problem-based projects "is overwhelming. Devise activities that have students working on issues that affect their community. Another consideration is that the finished product made by students be a document actually used by peers as an information tool. One example is a student-created online textbook. Another is to extend the traditional "lit circle" to a written document that other students can read to decide whether they want to read that book. A final idea is to have students research individual topics as small groups, create a new reference source online, and generate relevant questions that will result in student-generated assessments. To be "authentic," the final project must be "used," not merely "turned in."

3 EMBRACE YOUR SURROUNDINGS

Home, Sweet Home: The mobility of laptops holds great advantages. First, students are more likely to stay engaged if they are playing on their "home field." You have already established a positive working atmosphere in your class, and the resources you use on a daily basis are right there. Enhance the experience with the use of laptops. Also, take further advantage of the mobility by placing students in the best locations to maximize the learning. If the activity is done in small groups, place the laptops accordingly. Laptops also promote more peer revision with the simple trading of machines.

4 MAKE SURE THE TECHNOLOGY EXTENDS THE LEARNING

NEVER use computers just to use them. Make sure the learning accomplished with the technology could not be replicated without it. If the technology becomes superfluous, take out paper and pencil and let your neighbor next door use the laptops to create a voice thread, wiki, or digital story.

5 MODEL DESIRED BEHAVIOR

Using a projector, take students through the steps of the procedures so they can see exactly what they should do. Also, anticipate problematic steps and highlight them. Be patient with students who may not be as tech savvy.

6 USE WEB 2.0 TOOLS

Using laptops as glorified typewriters is doing a disservice to our students. Having them surf to find information is a step in the right direction, but utilizing the more collaborative tools available can really enhance the learning of "digital natives." Blogging as a revision tool, wikis as collaborative documents, podcasting, and social bookmarking are just a few of the many tools teachers have at their disposal to help 21st-century learners.

7 PROVIDE FREQUENT OPPORTUNITIES

Instead of taking the laptops out once a semester for three weeks, consider once a week for the entire semester. The frequent focused lessons that supplement your established curriculum will result in far more learning than the one mass "project" that may result in less efficient use of the technology. That way your colleagues can follow your lead, which results in your students receiving multiple chances to use the tools in a variety of situations.

8 DEVELOP STRUCTURE AND FRAMEWORK FOR LESSONS

Breaking out the laptops and turning them loose is never a good idea. Tech-related lessons should be structured within the framework of the curriculum. Remember, the laptop is merely the tool to enable the learning. Using technology does not ensure critical thinking. Give students specific expectations, due dates, and rubrics to keep them on track. Make sure instructions are readily accessible either online or in hard copy.

9 ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION IN BOTH CREATION AND PUBLICATION

The hallmark of Web 2.0 is the context of collaboration. Of course, consider collaboration within the class but also across town, on the other coast, or around the globe. Also, students tend to work more thoroughly and carefully if they know that the whole world may view their work. There are literally thousands of places on the Web to publish work...and talk about feedback!

10 MAKE SURE ACTIVITIES ARE MULTISENSORY

Focus on activities that include sight and sound. Biologically, humans possess an incredible range of visual acuity. Take advantage of this by including images, both still and animated, and spend time on composition and arrangement of pieces. Don't forget sound! Auditory stimulation from voice-over narration and music can add incredible meaning. Some examples of multimedia activities include digital storytelling, scrapblogging, voice threads, and screencasts. When recording in class, it is wise to invest in noise-cancelling microphones.

11 A COMPUTER FOR EVERY STUDENT?

Sometimes. Consider pairing students on each computer. The single keyboard and small learning space enhance Environmental Positive Interdependence (Johnson). Through sheer proximity, students will work together. As a teacher, make sure both students get a chance to "drive." Warning: two is usually the limit. Three on one station usually results in one getting nosed out.

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1:1 Tips From a Veteran

By Jonathan MacArt

Just tossing computers at kids won't make a 1:1 initiative successful. What you need is a more holistic approach—a virtual learning network to which students, teacher, and parents alike can connect.

The virtual learning network is important, but it must be easy to customize, and it must be easy to access. Here are some specifics to insist upon:

NO CLASS REGISTRATION: Students should not be responsible for building their own schedules. Instead, content should be delivered for them in the dynamic learnspace. There should also be a built-in support system for teachers, to assist them in building the initial introduction for their students.

INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING: Teachers should be able to tailor the curriculum to each student, which enables them to accommodate a diverse group that ranges from gifted students to those with special needs. Even assessments should be customized to evaluate individual learning needs. All of this must be done in a private setting, ensuring that no student is aware of the differences in content for other students.

GET CONTROL: Instead of sending students out onto the Web, elements of the Web should be available in the virtual learning environment. Thus, valuable Internet resources—including video feeds, chats, and other Web 2.0 tools—are immediately available to the learner, without the distractions or potential dangers present on the Web.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT: Parental access to the learning experience is an essential component of our system. All assignments are posted on the system, providing parents with the opportunity to see what students are learning at any given time, as well as to email teachers with questions or observations.

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