

The iPad is coming! (Or is it?)

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Here comes the iPad! Just as the iPhone (and the cheaper iPod) with their full operating system, touch interface and multiplicity of apps were on their way to becoming the preferred device for educating students (not in terms of actual usage, mind you, but in terms of utility), with Abilene Christian University becoming the first university to provide a device to every student and make it, according to their press release, “a central part of [their] innovative learning experience,” we now have available what may be an even better device.

The iPad combines all of the great features of the iPhone and iPod in a size which is likely to be much more appealing to K-12 teachers—and possibly to students as well, (although this is far from clear at this point.) What *is* clear is that the iPad will sell very well. Mark Anderson, a well-respected tech industry consultant, predicts it will become—with the enhancements of future versions—the best-selling computer of all time. And its format is already being imitated by other makers worldwide.

We can already glimpse some of its educational possibilities in a stunningly interactive Periodic Table of the Elements iPad app—and that is just the very beginning. Just as with the original Macintosh and the iPhone, creative software developers are all over this new device—it is where their energy will be spent for the foreseeable future. The results are likely to amaze all of us.

Given that, let’s assume for a minute that good numbers of K-12 teachers become interested in using the iPad (or its clones) in their classes. Let’s also assume that the number and quality of curriculum-based educational applications quickly makes this worthwhile from the point of view of learning, and that the price of the device, in quantity, is also not unreasonable (I would guess, from current pricing that it would be somewhere around \$500-750 a unit), so that IT officials begin thinking about buying them in large numbers for students to use 1:1. How likely is it that we’ll see lots of these devices in our K-12 schools?

It’s certainly not a given. But we are hopefully, by now, experienced enough to anticipate the many potential roadblocks, and to try to head at least most of them off in advance.

One question people will be asking, I am sure, is “How we can keep all these fragile and similar looking devices safe: safe from getting damaged, and safe from getting lost or stolen?” Unlike the iPhone or iTouch, iPads don’t have the huge advantage of fitting in a student’s pocket.

As Geoffrey Moore reminds us in his important book *Crossing the Chasm*, to help the iPad succeed in schools, we’d better be considering not just the device, but “the whole product.” This includes not just the right software, a curriculum that integrates it, and a workable pedagogy for its use, but also a student-oriented protective case, designed with the same thought and care as the actual product. As early experiments at Lemon Grove School District in California demonstrated, a well-designed and integrated computer/case combination, can contribute mightily to the success of a program. (Their well-padded case served as the vertical stand for the screen, so the student didn’t have to remove the machine to use it.)

What features would a well-designed student case for the iPad need to have?

- Protection and indestructibility, surely. One would hope that an iPad in one of these cases could be “frisbeed” across a room, or placed under a pile of books, or maybe even sat on, with no ill effects.
- Customizability, so that a student could make the case his or her own, and whose computer was whose could be instantly ascertained.
- Ease of carrying, even when a student is outside playing. The less frequently a student has to put the device down, the less likely it will be to disappear. This likely means backpack-type straps (elastic perhaps) and/or other special “wearability” features.
- A good locking system, so that the computer can be removed from the case only by its owner, or the administrator, without disabling it. And additionally, a strong docking system to assure the case can be securely attached (say to a pole) while the student is busy elsewhere.
- An alarm system that a student could set to go off if the case is moved or opened. (This might utilize those higher pitches that most students can hear but most teachers can’t.)
- Integration (as in the case of the Lemon Grove computer)—say with access through a velcro’d flap—so students don’t have to remove the case, making the device harder to lose.

Current computer case offerings have some of these features, but certainly not all of them, and, if done in small numbers, combining them all together might be costly. But if there were some standardization of requirements (e.g. a national or state-wide “school

spec”, the economies of scale could be substantial. If the cases were purchased, separately from the computers, students could perhaps bring their own cases that were approved (in a similar manner to TSA-approved locks), or schools could provide the cases to students as customizable “disposables” while maintaining stricter control of the hardware. Or a manufacturer could offer a terrific combination of case features and hardware features to make a more attractive and competitive package.

Why am I focusing on a seemingly small thing like cases? Because it would be an unbelievable shame if teachers and students who want to use iPads to improve learning can't get them because of this one solvable issue. As we all know, stranger things have happened.

So, creative IT personnel, start your case spec'ing. And creative casemakers, start your designing. And let's start thinking about the other parts of the “whole package,” such as a partnering pedagogy, and about overcoming other objections as well. Because either we find a good way to overcome the objections that will certainly arise, or else the iPad is unlikely to see the inside of very many classrooms.

On the other hand, the sister device that fits in the pocket (i.e. the iPhone or the iTouch) may still turn out to be the best solution of all, at least in many cases.

Either way, the app/touch screen era is now upon us. Let's try hard to avoid having everyone benefit except our students, and not to find ourselves once again watching from the school windows as the future flies by.

Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and game designer in the critical areas of education and learning. He is the author of Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning (Corwin Press 2010), Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Don't Bother Me, Mom, I'm Learning (Paragon House, 2006). Marc is the founder and CEO of Games2train, a game-based learning company, whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the L.A. and Florida Virtual Schools. He is also the creator of the site www.SocialImpactGames.com. Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. More of his writings can be found at www.marcprensky.com/writing/. Marc can be contacted at marc@games2train.com.