By Paul Wurster

What Is Your Favorite Ed Tech Tool?

Educators Hail the Benefits of Many Technologies During **30** Years of Effective Teaching and Learning

ISTE and NECC are celebrating 30 years of ed tech excellence in 2009. In recognition of this milestone, L&L will bring you several articles that honor the past, celebrate the present, and envision the future of educational technology. Thank you, readers, for accompanying us on the journey.

Learn more at www.iste.org/30

Ask ISTE members to look back on the past three decades and list their favorite teaching tools, and you will get a list of programs and gadgetry that spans the gamut of ed tech's transformational history. In honor of ISTE's 30th anniversary, *L&L* conducted a poll asking just that question, and one thing became clear: Although many educators had favorites, most had difficulty picking a single piece of technology as the most effective for teaching and learning because today's teachers use so many tech tools in combination.

After asking members of ISTE's Special Interest Groups to name three tech tools they felt were the most influential in education over the course of the past 30 years, three categories emerged. These categories were: Internet tools/resources (such as e-mail and Web browsers), general productivity tools (word processors, spreadsheets, etc.), interactive whiteboards/projectors, Web 2.0 tools, and portable digital devices. A follow-up poll on ISTE Connects (www.istconnects.org) and ISTE's website (www.iste.org) then asked members to pick one of these categories and explain why they felt a particular set of tools was most effective for education.

Internet Tools/Resources

Internet tools and resources, such as e-mail and search engines, were the clear winners in our poll, garnering more than a third of the total votes. A classroom without these basic tools is difficult to imagine for some and inconceivable for others.

Charlotte Oglesby of Perry County Schools in Marion, Alabama, felt that without connectivity and the basic tools that make the Internet useful, few technologies would have come into common use in teaching and learning.

What good would a PDA be if we could not connect to the Internet? Cell phones would be fancy walkie-talkies. I feel that the open access that we have to the Internet is one of the catalysts in the classroom, in teaching, and just living and working in today's society.

General Productivity Tools

Word processing programs and spreadsheets have long since fallen off the list of hot tech tools, but educators haven't lost sight of their value. These humble tools commanded more than 20% of the votes cast in our poll, finishing a strong second among much trendier options.

Katy Gryta of Wallace Middle School in Kyle, Texas, said that these tools, coupled with e-mail, make teaching a true collaborative profession because teachers are able to create instructional materials and then share them across district boundaries, state lines, and beyond.

The ability of teachers to use productivity tools such as Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and Publisher to create and electronically save instructional materials is a powerful thing much taken for granted, yet we've had that ability widely available for the past 20 years. Without this ability, lessons would have to be created from scratch over and over, every year, wasting valuable time that could be spent improving and refining last year's lesson.
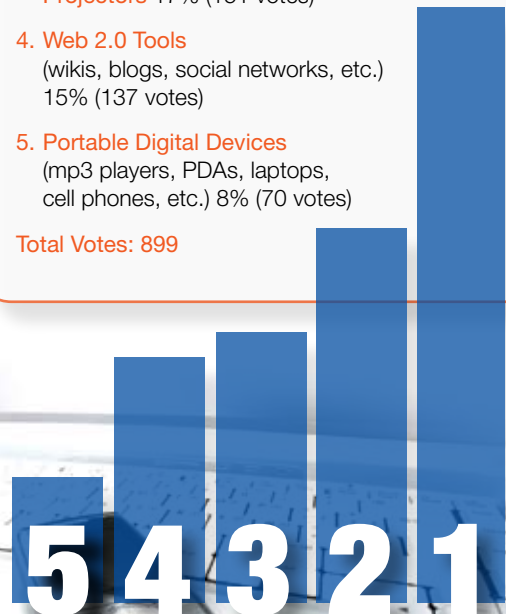
Poll Results

Which group below would you choose as the most effective for teaching and learning over the past 30 years?

1. Internet Tools/Resources (e-mail, search engines, Creative Commons, wireless access, video on demand) 37% (332 votes)

2. General Productivity Tools (word processors, spreadsheets, slide presentation programs, databases) 23% (209 votes)

3. Interactive Whiteboards and Projectors 17% (151 votes)

4. Web 2.0 Tools (wikis, blogs, social networks, etc.) 15% (137 votes)

5. Portable Digital Devices (mp3 players, PDAs, laptops, cell phones, etc.) 8% (70 votes)

Total Votes: 899

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TOOLING UP

L&L gathered comments and poll data for this article using a variety of the very Web-based tools referenced in the results.

We conducted the original survey, which asked members of ISTE's Special Interest Groups to name three tools they felt were most influential in education, using a survey tool called Zoomerang (www.zoomerang.com).

After compiling those results, we posted our poll question using PollDaddy (www.polldaddy.com) on ISTE's homepage (www.iste.org) and provided a link for visitors who wished to comment. We also posted the poll within a discussion on ISTE Connects (www.isteconnects.org) and on the *L&L* group page on the ISTE Community Ning (www.iste-community.org/group/landl). Members could cast their votes and comment in any location, and PollDaddy automatically aggregated the votes from the three sites into a single bar graph.

We used a few other social networking tools to let people know about the poll and our plans to use the comments in this article. A quick post on ISTE's Facebook site (www.iste.org/iste-facebook) and a tweet on Twitter gave ISTE friends and followers a brief invitation and a short link to the poll, which we made shorter using TinyURL.com.

You can read all of the comments, take the poll, and leave a comment of your own at www.iste.org/30.

Interactive Whiteboards/Projectors

Many of those who chose whiteboards and projectors as the most effective tools used words such as *transformative* and *revolutionary* in their justifications. There is little doubt that these tools are some of the hottest on the ed tech market today, and many advocates cite their usefulness in the classroom as undeniable.

Jan Williams of Horizon Elementary in Kent, Washington, said that developing her math lessons for teaching with whiteboards was a labor of love, and seeing her students succeed was a payoff worth the effort.

I believe interactive whiteboards and projectors have helped students VISUALLY see and understand the information presented. Gone are the days of long lectures. Students are engaged and actively involved and creating their own learning.

Naima Haviland, a multimedia team lead for Booz Allen Hamilton in Pensacola, Florida, agreed that the visual and interactive components these tools provide are especially important to English language learners of all ages.

They allow students and teachers to engage with the material instead of just look at it. Our young adult foreign military students can visually grasp an idea, which gives them a rest from trying to negotiate a lot of text in English. Also, classroom management systems in tandem with electronic whiteboards really bring lessons to life.

Web 2.0 Tools

Not surprisingly, Web 2.0 tools were a popular pick for those who took our poll. Educators incorporate these tools into their curriculum because they encourage collaboration and engagement, and students just plain enjoy using them. Some felt that the wide assortment of Web 2.0 tools available has helped bring more technology into the classroom. Larry Kuhns of the American School of Warsaw in Poland said that the varied applications offered by Web 2.0 has driven the laptop program at his school.

With Google Docs and Moodle, both students and teachers have been able to collaborate and work on documents outside of the normal meeting times. The quality of work has improved, and the writing process has been greatly enhanced and easier to facilitate. Our administration and school board have moved in this direction as well.

Portable Digital Devices

Most people have a favorite gadget they simply wouldn't leave home without, and some place an even higher value on a particular piece of technology in their classroom. That was the case for Deborah Kerwood of the American International School in Cairo, Egypt, who commented, "If my classroom were on fire, I would grab the Kurzweil first."

The ability to pick technology up and take it along proved to be the most important feature for 8% of our polltakers, many of whom did not single out a specific piece of equipment. That was the case for Kathy Malaska of Logan Township School District in New Jersey.

While all are valuable or meaningful in their own right, the portability of laptops, PDAs and the like have changed the way everyone teaches and learns (teachers as well as students). The fact that we no longer sit in a spare room in our homes connected to the Internet with a phone line pretty much says it all.

If our poll had an option called "all of the above," it's safe to say that this category would have received its fair share of votes. Several polltakers expressed difficulty in choosing a single technology that stood out as the most effective, now that educators have incorporated so many different tools into their curricula. What is certain is that new tools will continue to make their way into classrooms, and educators will keep on using last year's tools—as "dusty and old" as some may consider them—to make learning fun, engaging, and effective in class.

Paul Wurster is managing editor of L&L and a former editor of ISTE's journals, the Journal of Research on Technology in Education (JRTE) *and the* Journal of Computing in Teacher Education (JCTE). *He has 10 years of experience in journalism.*