

# St. Petersburg Times

## Laptop literati are technically ahead

**Welcome to a paperless class, where the seventh-graders are anything but old school.**

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Here there are no handouts. No pencils or pens. No notebooks.

Jeremy Jackson's seventh-graders at Williams IB Middle Magnet School for International Studies sit at desks with wireless laptops.

They access their geography textbook, all 842 pages, online and on a recent Thursday flipped between it and the Internet CIA World Factbook. With a click, they hear an unfamiliar word pronounced and see a definition. Another click gives immediate feedback on a test.

Come on in and take a seat in the classroom of the future. See how the slate that worked for Abe Lincoln has evolved.

This is Jackson's first year at Williams, and his first attempt at teaching a core class - humanities - paperless. Other Hillsborough students take specified courses for credit through the Florida Virtual School. Students in the Blake Accelerated Curriculum Program complete about 95 percent of their course work online, coming to campus for midterms, final exams and tutoring.

Jackson tells his students that we are moving from an industrial to an informational society. He encourages them to see their place in the future.

"I think our education system should mimic the real world," Jackson said. "You don't get someone ready for racing in the Indy 500 by teaching them how to ride a horse."

Consider how the FBI tracks criminals and terrorists electronically. Lawyers can file documents via the Internet. Doctors log patient records into a computer database. We send messages and pay bills with a click.

Most schools lag behind, but some have embraced the change.

Eminence Middle School in Henry County, Ky., passed out personal digital assistants in 2000 to seventh- and eighth-graders. They do homework on them, read Romeo and Juliet and so on.

Every student got a laptop at Empire High School, which opened last year in Vail, Ariz. Sure, it costs a little more, said Wayne Gritis, the Arizona school's site technology coordinator. Instead of buying the \$600 to \$700 of textbooks estimated for each student throughout high school, their school district paid \$800 to \$900 for the loaded laptops.

But unlike every other science textbook that lists Pluto as the ninth planet, Gritis created a new link in their online text.

"We are up to date," he said.

Empire operates at about 90 percent paperless. Besides laptops in student bookbags, expect to find a notebook and perhaps a novel from the library.

A computer can't replace a good book, critics say. Studies show that people read about 75 percent faster on paper. Critics also lament the demise of handwriting when students use only keyboards.

But last week, Jackson's students plugged in life expectancies from the Factbook for residents of Liberia 39, and for U.S. citizens (77). They scrolled down to graphs where their answers were charted automatically.

"If a country has a high poverty rate, they tend to have a short life expectancy. Why do you think that is?" Jackson asked them.

Hanna Ro raised her hand. "If they have no money, they may not be able to get health care."

Hanna's mother, Dee, wasn't sure about the concept at first.

"I'm from the old school, where we used notebooks, but she is learning," she said.

Dee Ro keeps track of Hanna's grades online.

"It's really cool," Hanna said. We have our own Web pages."

By the end of the year, each student's Web page will have every assignment he or she has done.

Of Jackson's 150 students, seven have no access to a computer at home. These are the students who most need his class, he says.

Outside the classroom, Jackson teaches a certification class called Integrating Technology in Education for new teachers transitioning from other careers. He was the technology specialist for three years at Greco Middle School before coming to Williams.

He has been working toward this technology-rich classroom for years.

"I really don't want to have paper in my classroom," Jackson said. "I don't think it's necessary." On his desktop and in his drawers there is no paper.

No notepads. No pens or pencils. Not even a sticky note.