What's in it for Me?


I talk to many teachers about problems they face as they work to increase instructional use of computers. In the past two years I have seen a significant shift in the nature of their responses. Initially, the responses invariably focused on the availability of hardware. "We need more hardware—my students can't get access to machines." Now the typical response focuses on teachers' time to do what they know needs to be done. "I don't have time to learn about the new software and to change my lesson plans."

I believe this shift in focus represents a maturing of the field of computers in education. The pioneers (early adopters) were willing to spend whatever amount of time was necessary to overcome the obstacles. Indeed, if hardware and software were obstacles, pioneers were often willing to buy their own hardware and write their own software. These early adopters are now the core of our computer-in-education leadership. Sometimes they wonder why other teachers are not so eager to join the computer age.

The answer is simple. Most teachers don't have the computer interest, ability, and expertise of the early adopters. However, a great many have a healthy curiosity and professional interest, and so have taken some inservice training in the computer field. But the amount of inservice training they have had represents a very small fraction of the time and energy that it takes to become seriously involved with computers in education. Many of the people providing the inservice have forgotten how much time and energy it actually takes.

Many teachers who have been inserviced in instructional uses of computers are taking a wait-and-see attitude. These teachers have become more aware of the potentials of computers in education and the need for their students to have an education suitable for life in an Information Age society. But they have also become aware of the difficulties involved in making instructional use of computers.

The first and most obvious difficulty has been a lack of adequate access to suitable hardware and software. There are now many schools where access to facilities is no longer a major issue. The amount of computer facility in such schools exceeds the perceived needs of teachers for computer access. But in most of these schools there has not been an overwhelming rush toward making full use of the facilities. "Access to facilities" is of declining value as an excuse for not making instructional use of computers.

Most teachers feel that they are overworked, underpaid, and not adequately appreciated. They have a professional commitment that includes lifelong learning, adapting to change, trying new ideas, etc. They are devoted to helping provide high quality educational opportunities for their students. But time pressures on teachers are overwhelming. Increasingly, teachers are asking, "What's in it for me? Will it make my teaching job easier?"

These are difficult questions. One can address them by throwing up a wall of "professional responsibility" issues. One can attempt to make teachers who don't adopt computers feel guilty or inadequate for their inaction. One can attempt to create computer-oriented requirements for all teachers. Such approaches are being tried in many school districts, and they meet with varying levels of success.

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On average, such approaches will be slow to bear fruit. Much better and quicker results are obtained by showing/convincing teachers that an investment in learning to use computers will indeed make their lives better. However, there is no universal way that computers will make life better for all teachers. In the next few paragraphs I provide some of the things I say to teachers who ask, "What's in it for me?" Undoubtedly you have your own favorites that can be added to the list.

1. If you make even a little use of computers in your classroom, there will be less pressure put on you (by yourself and others) to use computers in your classroom. Moreover, you will build confidence in your ability to use computers in an instructional setting. You will like yourself better because you will have successfully coped with this situation.

2. A strong computer orientation represents a possible career path. Quite a few teachers have developed a renewed interest in education because of this new career path and because of the fun they have had in working with the challenges of computers. Many teachers have reported that the subjects they teach have "come alive again" as they have approached them from a computer-oriented point of view.

3. A little bit of knowledge can go a long way. Some pieces of software are easy to learn to use and can help a teacher. A single piece of software, such as a word processor or a gradebook program, can make life quite a bit easier for some teachers. Note here the emphasis is on learning to use just one piece of software, and learning to use it to help increase teacher productivity. If a teacher prepares lots of handouts for students or in some other application must do a lot of writing, a word processor can make life a lot easier. If a teacher keeps detailed grade records on a large number of students, a gradebook program can save a lot of time. Another example of such teacher utility software is software to create, maintain and use a database of test items. Most teachers have file drawers of such material. Once it is transferred to a computer, the work required to use it is greatly decreased.

4. Computers turn on some students. Part of the reward of being a teacher is to see students get deeply interested and involved in some academic pursuit. A teacher who can make instructional use of computers has one additional vehicle for turning on students.

5. Computer-assisted instruction is another mode of instruction. Part of the reward of being a teacher is to see your students learn and grow. CAI may well fit the specific needs of some of your students, so you will be a more successful teacher if you take advantage of CAI in such situations.

6. Whole-class based computer activities, such as computer simulations, can add a new dimension to instruction and can be a lot of fun. After an initial time investment, many teachers find that this use of computers makes teaching easier.

This short list illustrates three major categories of responses. First, essentially all teachers acknowledge some professional responsibility in the computer field and are willing to expend
some effort to fulfill this professional responsibility. Second, computers can indeed make life easier. The initial learning effort is rewarded by increased productivity for the remainder of one's teaching career. Finally, computers can help students—which in turn helps teachers.