RAK REPORT

RAK Chapter Newsletter

January 2008

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HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

The ***RAK Report*** would like to wish you and yours a very joyous and prosperous New Year / Hijra. May 2008 /1429 be a great year for your personal and educational growth.

RAK Report would like to thank Neil Mcbeath for his contributions to this issue. Our **February** edition will be on Personalizing Language Learning: is it necessary? If you would like to donate materials to this or future editions (topics listed at the end of this newsletter), or if you would like the e-mail version, please e-mail Darcy at:

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and include **RAK Report** in the **subject line**

"We thought we'd get more frequent use if students could change colors to match their moods - something like Swatches - but now we need this huge storage room for extra colors to match mood swings."

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TESOL Elections

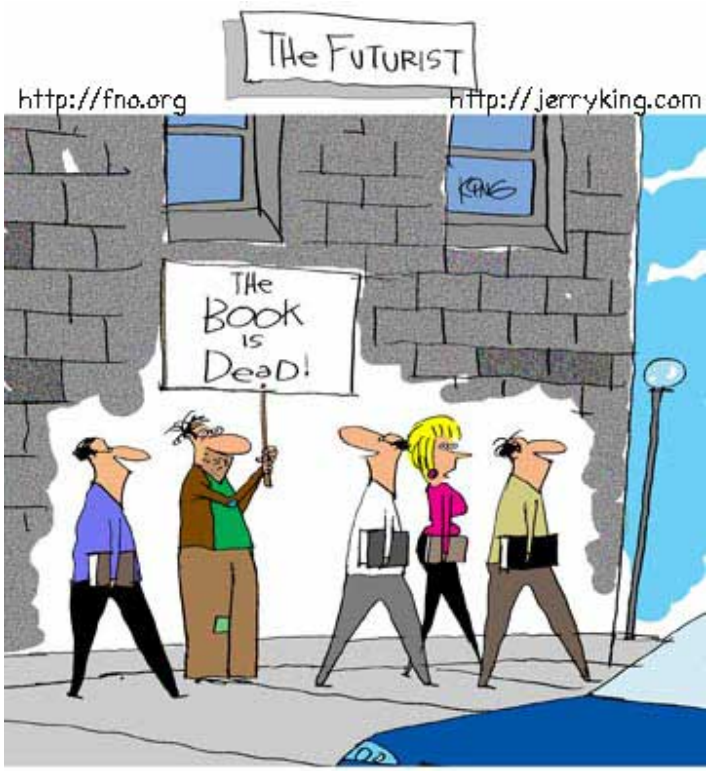
From January 1st until February 28th TESOL Arabia is holding elections for the following offices:

- Vice-President 2008-2009, President for 2009-2010 (Nominees for this position must have previously held an Executive Council post)
- Membership Secretary
- Publications Coordinator
- Special Interest Groups Coordinator
- Abu Dhabi Chapter Representative
- **Ras Al Khaimah Representative**
- Sharjah Chapter Representative

For more information about what each position does, see the Job Descriptions

View the election site at: http://tesolarabia.org/elections/

You must be a paid up member of TESOL to vote!



"They've been predicting that for years!"

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Learning with Laptops

Laptops and Language Teaching.

I have in front of me a book entitled *Computers in Applied Linguistics* (Pennington and Stevens 1992) which is an edited collection of 13 papers. Not one of them ever refers to laptops.

One reason for this is probably the date of the publication – 1992. Just as the business machines industry was unable to envisage a time when there would be a demand for computers that could be used by "ordinary people" – the PC, so many people in education never envisaged a time when laptops would become so (comparatively) inexpensive that they would become available to ordinary students.

The result of such thinking was the development of the computer lab. This was the direct pedagogic heir of the language lab. Students would use computers in lock-step, or, at best, would choose from a variety of pre-selected programs and then beaver away for the length of their time slot.

Such rigid thinking has, in fact, bedeviled computer assisted language learning (CALL) from its earliest days, and it is unfortunate that for much of its development CALL has been driven by nerds and stakeholders, rather than by teachers and students.

In the early days of CALL, nerds fell over themselves in their eagerness to explain the wonderful things that computers could do, frequently ignoring the fact that other methods did the same things more effectively. As a result, we had illustrations like the one that appears in Daiute (1985; 147). This shows a child drawing on a pad, and simultaneously twisting her head to look at an image that appears on a screen slightly to her left and above her immediate line of vision. To the impartial observer, it is quite clear that the child would be better served with a piece of paper and a crayon.

Similarly, the nerds' determination to brighten standard activities by adding simulated firework displays in celebration of high scores did little to allay the suspicions of teachers who remembered the inflated claims made language labs (McBeath 1994).

Most tellingly, however, many of the programs that the nerds initially designed were entirely reliant on the total co-operation of the learners. Programs where children were invited to key in their names and then receive "personalized" feedback, stood no chance against the child who typed in "Batman" and then chortled gleefully every time the screen announced "Congratulations, Batman, you have scored…" Nor, as Burns (1984) indicates, did programs which purported to assist academic prewriting survive the failure of "the user's willing suspension of disbelief" (P.17) As soon as the students realized that they were talking to a programmed machine, rather than sustaining genuine communication, the exercise collapsed.

So far as stakeholders are concerned, many CALL programs have been initiated by headteachers and Directors of Education for whom the computer lab is a technological status symbol. Like the (all too often locked) School Library, this is a facility that can be shown to visitors. It is supposedly a visible sign of progress, but the difficulties involved in maintaining and upgrading the facility are frequently underestimated. (Cozens 2007).

Two examples will prove this point. Firstly, in Britain under the Thatcher government, we saw the establishment of the first City technology Colleges. These were, in fact, secondary schools, but they were designed to be beacons of excellence, where uniformed pupils would recreate the achievements of the old 1944 Education Act Grammar Schools. They would achieve high grades in all subjects.

As part of a partnership programme, it was then suggested that local businesses might like to sponsor this initiative, primarily by donating computer equipment that was surplus to requirement.

Exactly why British business should wish to ensure that its future workforce received training on already obsolete equipment, however, was never fully explained. My own belief is that whoever drafted the policy had no real understanding of ICT.

Similarly, one of the principal problems facing the introduction of ICT equipment in the Royal Air Force of Oman was the sheer length of time that it took to obtain permission to purchase. By the time that a request for one piece of equipment had been submitted, accepted, discussed in committee and approved, there was every chance that something newer, faster, smaller and cheaper had already appeared on the market. Private sector CEO's have the authority to approve large purchases, but the public sector is frequently reduced to playing catch-up.

And this is what I think we are doing now with both laptop computers and mobile phones. The TESOL Arabia Learner Independence SIG is currently (November 2007) engaged in a discussion on whether mobile phones can be productively used in the classroom, following Heather Baba's discovery of students spontaneously using their phones to record and practice material presented in class role-plays.

In the same way, some students spontaneously use laptops. When I was working with the Royal Saudi air Force in Dammam, my RSAF cadets were forbidden access to newspapers, TV, radio and the internet during the working week. One cadet subverted these regulations by ensconcing himself and his laptop in a WiFi coffee shop for most of every Thursday morning. That was his time to unwind, and catch up.

He was also exploiting the major strength of the laptop, and that is its portability. Certainly, students can use laptops to draft, redraft, edit and spell check term papers and assignments, but that can be done on PC's as well, if not better, for PC's are more likely to be linked to a printer.

The laptop, however, can be taken on field trips. Today (November 19th) three classes from the top level of the Sultan Qaboos University's foundation course have visited three different museums in the Muscat area. Each student took a worksheet to complete during and after the visit, but it might have been more effective if the same information had been recorded using laptops. The students could then have completed the information, incorporated photographs from digital cameras or mobile phones, and then collated the information to produce a truly comprehensive record of their visits.

Even so, this scenario begs several questions. Will museums permit photography? The Sultan's Armed Forces Museum, housed in a restricted military area, officially forbids ALL photographs, but in fact takes a fairly relaxed attitude when students are involved. If it were to enforce its rules, however, then the low-tech worksheet would be the only practical solution.

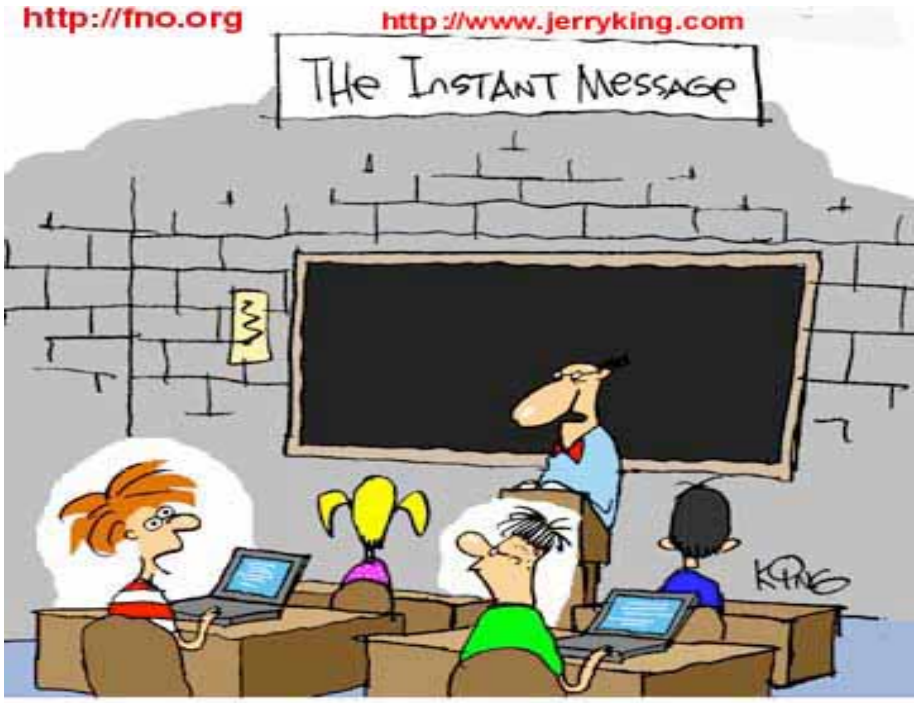
More importantly, just how available are laptops to our students? The Zayed University famously provides all its undergraduates with their own laptop, but this generosity is unusual. At the present moment, the Omani Ministry of Education is implementing an easy-finance scheme to allow *teachers* to purchase their own laptops, and even that initiative is well in advance of the situation reported by Carballo-Calero (2001) who claims that for Spanish teachers, internet access is a luxury.

Under these circumstances, it may be that laptop use will remain restricted. Economic, rather than pedagogic factors will conspire to keep this ICT device out of many classrooms.

Neil McBeath

References.

Burns, Major Hugh. (1984) "recollections of First-Generation Computer Assisted
Prewriting". In William Wresch (ed) *The Computer in Composition Instruction*. Urbana; Illinois National Council of Teachers of English Pp. 15-33
Carballo-Calero, V.F. (2001) "El professor de ingles y las nuevas tecnologias; Pasion o aversion?" Paper delivered at CALL in the 21st Century, ESADE, Barcelona, 30th June – 2nd July 2000. In Paul Brett (ed) 2001 *CALL in the 21st Century* CD ROM IATEFL Whitstable; Kent. Section 4:1.
Cozens, Phil. (2007) Personal communication.
Daiute, Colette. (1985) *Writing and Computers*. Reading; Mass. Addison-Wesley
Pennington, Martha & Stevens, Vance. (1992) *Computers in Applied Linguistics* Clevedon; Avon Multilingual Matters.



"How did they get through boring lectures back in the days of paper? I can IM and it looks just like note-taking!"

* IM = Instant Messaging

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RAK Representative

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"This new hand held digital assistant is amazing. It does Shock and Awe as well as 14 other preprogrammed routines to wake up the students and keep them learning."

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Links on Laptops in Education

Have a look at these links for more information on laptop learning.

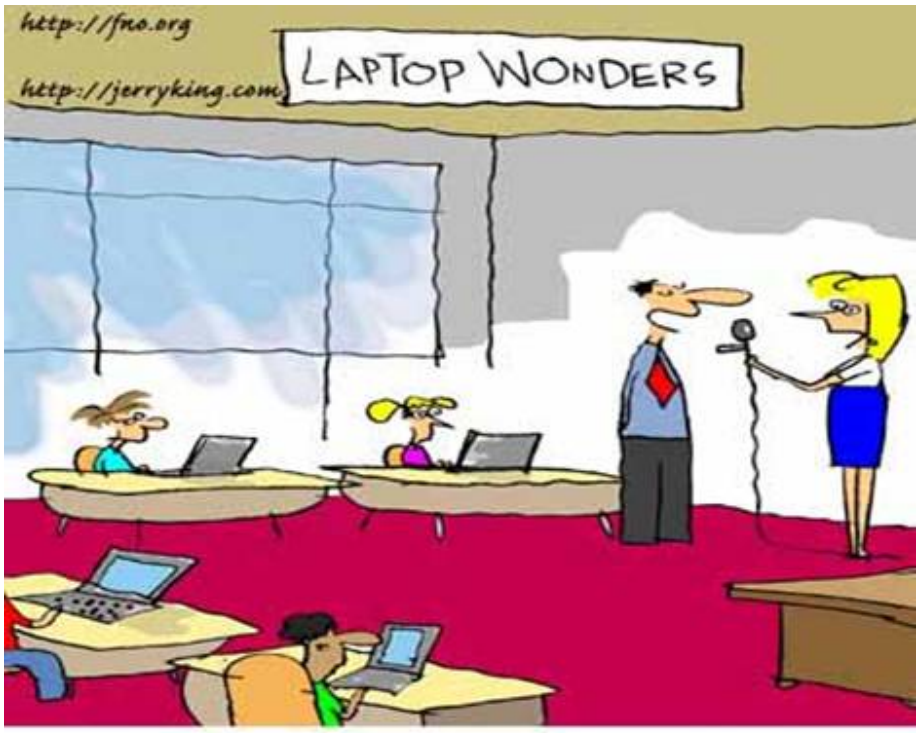
http://www.newcurriculum.com/2001/ed10-15.htm

http://fcit.usf.edu/multimedia/deliver/deliverb.html

http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic84.htm

http://moore.portlandschools.org/ibook/math.html

http://www.futurelab.org.uk/resources/documents/project_reports/teaching_with_games/TWG_report.pdf



"And why did you buy a laptop for just the sixth graders in your state?"
"We wanted to be the first state to put all our eggs in one basket."

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Important TESOL Arabia Dates

January 12 – Western Region Chapter Meeting

January 19 – Abu Dhabi Chapter Meeting

January 19 – Al Ain Chapter Meeting

February 8 — ESP SIG Forum

February 16 — Dubai / ESP SIG Event

February 23 — RAK Chapter / ESP SIG Event

February 23 — Eastern Region / IT SIG Event

2008 TESOL Arabia International Conference,

March 13-15, 2008, at Dubai Men's College, Dubai, UAE

Getting in Deep

Unless students are trained to use the advanced features of search engines like Google, they tend to gather huge piles of pages that contribute little to

understanding.

Some have likened these piles of information to a landfill.

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The next edition of the RAK Report will come out in February 2008. It will focus on: "Personalizing Language Learning: is it necessary?"

To contribute articles, ideas or suggestions, please contact Darcy at:

Darcy.Harris@Hct.ac.ae
and include **RAK Report** in the **subject line**

*Future editions of the *The RAK Report* will feature the following topics:

March: Critical Issues in Education (Also the Theme for this year's conference)

April: Encouraging Deep Learning

May: Teaching Controversial Issues

June: Translating Learning Research into Practice

*Topics subject to change

For Back issues of the RAK Report, visit the RAK Chapter section of the TESOL Arabia Website at:

http://tesolarabia.org/chapters/rak/