Technology in the Classroom of the 90s
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This semester’s second Undergraduate Student Focus Group discussed the use of various technologies in the classroom. Student participants were from diverse backgrounds, ranging from first- to fourth-year, from different schools of the University. Their experience with technology in the classroom included the use of videos and CD-ROM programs in foreign language classes, e-mail discussion groups, the U.Va. main server to work on projects, and World Wide Web-based applications, such as Web access to course materials, CAD in the School of Architecture, and MOOs (see related article).

Many aspects of classroom innovations have been received positively by students, according to our panel. Electronic mail has allowed easier access to instructors and quick replies to questions and concerns. In a similar vein, moderated discussion lists seem to work best, as the moderator (instructor) can pass on to the class those questions that are of interest to everyone and answer privately those that concern only one student. Unmoderated lists sometimes generate too much material that may be irrelevant to the class as a whole, and students feel overwhelmed with the sheer volume of material. The most effective lists allow for discussion of material that can then be extended in class. That is, topics discussed electronically should be brought into the actual class, to tie them into the course more concretely and reinforce that e-mail discussions are not purely outside the realm of the classroom.

Some of the drawbacks that the participants noted about e-mail include the potential for reduction of human interaction. They also observed that while e-mail office hours allow easy access to their instructors, the phenomenon of one question leading to another does not take place as often as it does while chatting in an office. A mix of e-mail and traditional office hours may be a solution here. Students commented positively on instructors who hold regular office hours either instead of or in addition to being accessible by e-mail.

Many instructors are finding places for their courses on the World Wide Web. Some post class materials, new and old, for student reference and to communicate with the class. The students noted that use of some Internet resources “forces” them to prepare assignments prior to class. The anonymity breaks their inhibitions to ask questions, encourages student interaction, and makes subsequent face-to-face interactions easier. A potential hazard to Web assignments is the temptation to “click and learn.” One participant noted there is a temptation to print out pages that may never be read, under the mistaken assumption that if the material is downloaded, it is assimilated (“Click - I’m learning!”).
When asked about the workload associated with using various technologies, the students responded overwhelmingly that the instructors seem to have considerably more work. The students themselves were not significantly affected, although their workloads are sometimes slightly higher. Additionally, the use of various computer technologies teaches the students to be computer literate and gives them marketable skills.

Use of technology is more effective in some classes than in others. The participants noted examples of classes where the main “technologies” used were engaging lectures, chalk, and a textbook. Videotapes can provide examples for illustration of certain points in such classes, but the lecture covers most of the relevant information. Engaging lectures and classroom discussions often provide both the necessary course material and the spark of interest to continue study. In general, the participants suggested that instructors use technology as a tool, and not just include it to “move with the times.” Mandated use is neither expected nor effective, especially when the instructor is not actively involved in its use. Used well and incorporated into the main corpus of class materials, such resources as e-mail and the World Wide Web can be effective classroom tools. Moderation is the key to successful use. Our focus group stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between technology and traditional teaching methods.