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# iPad vs Paper

Justin Nightingale

As those that know me will testify, I love gadgets. All gadgets. If it has a battery in it then the chances are that I either own it or at the very least have a deep interest in it. So much so that I feel far more comfortable using a keyboard than I do writing with a pencil - to an embarrassing degree.

During my time here at the primary school I've enjoyed trying to bring a taste of this passion into the English program in one form or another - the most obvious being our "Language Lab" reading program using the school's computers and online software which has proved to be popular with the middle and upper grades and has also been extended as a homework activity for those who so desire.

When I first saw the iPad (and after asking permission from my wife...) I decided that it had to be mine not just because I wanted a new toy but because I was keen to find out whether using one in the school environment was a realistic replacement for the bundles of paper that teaching inevitably involves.

The iPad has taken the computer world by storm. It has revived the long stagnant "tablet" market that was floundering for 10-15 years. Even though the technology to build such a device was by and large available, the idea of a computer without a keyboard just never caught the consumers' interest. Since its release in April, 2010, Apple has managed to sell 20 million of the devices worldwide which equates to nearly 90% of the market. Also, reports of schools and universities around the world giving students/teachers iPads and making them part of the teaching program are becoming more and more common.

So, does it live up the hype? Last year, I gave the iPad a trial "in the wild" of the primary school to see if it really could replace my paper class lists, reports, pictures and notes. Was it invaluable? Was it just a big, shiny paperweight?

## Class Register

During and after lessons I need to write down little facts about students. If they forgot their homework, if they have passed EIKEN, if their reading is unusually good - any information that can help me get a picture of where they stand. With paper, I just have to jot it down in a little white box next to their name.

While the iPad screen is big and clear enough to serve the same purpose, it's fiddly. It just takes too much time to get to the right place and to type on the pop-up keyboard. I WANT it to be better but paper is just too convenient in the hustle and bustle of a lesson.

iPad 0, Paper 1.

## Pictures

Every year, I take a picture of all the students in all the grades and make A 4 "picture registers" for every class to help me put names to faces. That piece of paper is a life saver. As is so often the case, someone will put their hand up in the class and for the life of me I can't remember their name. One cheeky glance at that A 4 and no-one suspects a thing.

iPad: Push the home button, go to the photos app, find the register, open the file, look for their face.... again, while the screen is good enough, it just takes

too much time to navigate. Paper wins again.

iPad 0, Paper 1

## Teacher's Notes

After each lesson, I write down what I did. Paper has served me well for many years but there are two disadvantages that allow the iPad to pull back one point:

Firstly, my handwriting. It's so unreadable that it's bordering on a lost, ancient dialect. The iPad is far more pleasant to the eye even if it does take a little longer to input. Secondly, syncing. I have the habit of looking at my notes on the morning train before school just to get my head into work mode. Automatic syncing between devices means I never forget my notes and they're always legible.

iPad 1, Paper 0.

## Vocabulary

Before opening a new chapter in the textbook, I pre-teach the vocabulary for the unit either in a direct "copy the teacher" style or by using the words in some kind of activity. To do this, I've been using A4 flashcards showing each word.

With the iPad, I can just hold it up in front of them and swipe through each word as they repeat. Very convenient and much easier than hundreds of flashcards. If the word fills the entire screen and the brightness is turned up, everyone in the class can see it clearly. If they can't or I'd like to display more than just a single word I can connect the iPad to the large, class displays for the fuller flavour.

iPad 1, Paper 0.

## Database

I'm currently in the throws of building an all-encompassing student database (including pictures) If all goes well, I'm hoping to extend this to other departments, not just for the English teachers.

Using the "Bento" database software (a sibling of it's more powerful brother "Filemaker") I can not only allow teachers' computers to sync with a single, master database but also with smaller devices such as an iPhone. Of course, there are security considerations with such an arrangement but as a proof of concept, it's an attractive solution to the data fragmentation associated with multiple paper filing systems.

iPad 1, Paper 0

## Conclusion

iPad 3, Paper 2. Technically, it's a victory for Apple but I'm going to have to blow my whistle, overrule this result and declare a victory for paper, as I shall explain.

As much as I'd love the iPad to be a central part of my teaching day it suffers from (and is thoroughly beaten by paper because of) a lack of "instantness". I'm not quite sure what it's like at other schools but at a primary school there are so many things happening in those 45 minute lessons - things that need a fast response. The most obvious is the names/faces issue. As hard as I try, there is always a face I can't quite place and having that trusty picture register instantly at hand is invaluable.

Keeping track of homework and general progress in the course is also another motivation for leaning towards paper. There are times when I just need to check something and trying to find the relevant file on the iPad during the lesson just isn't a reality. An A 4 folder is eminently more user-friendly.

It's outside the lesson where the iPad's colours really shine - especially in regards to having a database. Having said that, with the portability of the iPad not being a requirement, it would be far more convenient to use a desktop computer for inputting and reviewing such information thus making it's *raison d'être* a little unclear.

My iPad experiment lasted about 3 months. While it was a fun novelty with some genuine value I have to begrudgingly admit that the mystical "Paperless Office" is still some way off.

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