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MiTech Here Come the Ten Dollar Tablets

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My first computer was a Texas Instruments 99/4A. It boasted 16K of internal memory, an attachable tape drive, and a speech simulator. Priced over $500.00, it was not a luxury my family could afford in 1982—I inherited the computer from a generous relative. Today, of course, this same amount will buy a new tablet pc with exponentially more computing power, plus the ability to connect to the web. And while the TI 99/4A may evoke nostalgia for the eighties, its actual value is close to nothing.

It stands to reason that like all computers, tablets will increase in power and decrease in price over time. The industry axiom that describes this trend most accurately is called Moore's Law. In 1965, Gordon Moore predicted that computing power—measured by the number of transistors per integrated circuit—would double every two years. Accompanied by the dropping price of transistors, this trend has provided more computing power per dollar every year for the past fifty years.

High quality tablets are still relatively expensive: the new iPad2, for example, starts at $499.00, while Android-based tablets are only slightly cheaper. Still, there are signs that affordable tablets are on their way. Just as the MIT One-Laptop-Per-Child (OLPC) project has provided over 200 million $200.00 laptops to impoverished countries, so too governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations are now developing highly affordable tablets. Though these efforts are complicated by profit motives and material costs, at least one country—India—has promised a $35.00 tablet by the end of this year.

Assuming that such efforts succeed, eventually, in India and elsewhere, we can expect a steady stream of tablets into Michigan public schools over the next decade. Within the English language arts, tablets could help teachers reinforce and expand the study of language and literature in significant ways.

First, tablets could offer English teachers and students more control over the curriculum. In English language arts, the canon of commonly taught texts has remained largely unchanged over the past 100 years, even with gains in works by women and people of color. The relative rigidity of the canon results from the power of the textbook publishing industry: most English teachers still rely on commercial anthologies from Prentice Hall, McGraw-Hill, or another corporate giant. These anthologies reproduce texts that have been well received in the past, eschew controversial materials, abridge expensive contemporary works, and do little to cater to individual reading taste.

Using tablets—or even simple e-readers such as the Kindle—will not free us from corporate machinations, of course. The e-book industry has exploded in the past five years, and Amazon recently reported selling more Kindle texts than print books for the first time. And the competing proprietary formats of e-books (a Barnes and Noble Nook will not read a Kindle text) make for a complicated and overly specialized marketplace.

There are also legitimate concerns about the nature of e-reading. Is reading a hyperlinked e-book distracting? Does the reading device itself hurt our ability to concentrate? These questions should not be dismissed, though it seems likely that they will fade with the next generation of e-readers—not just the devices, but the electronic readers who grow up with them.

Indeed, it seems possible to imagine a school that distributes inexpensive tablet pcs to its students at the beginning of the year. Each course has a set of downloadable texts, with some free from the public domain, and some available at an educational discount. In English, teachers and students could work together to device a canon of texts, based on student interest and need. Better still, the course could be responsive to events in the lives of students in a way that commercial anthologies could not. The death of the pop star Amy Winehouse, for instance, might lead to an examination of celebrity autobiographies and biographies, resulting in a critical discussion of the genre and inquiry into the tragic path taken by so many stars.

We should also welcome tablets into our English classrooms as writing tools. While tablet keypads can be awkward to use, tablets are portable and highly localized devices that can help students write with purpose for real audiences. In writing about a place, for instance, students can use tablets to capture images and sound, and then publish their final products online, tagging their work with the specific location. A class world literature class examining the idea of disputed territories could find locations that have seen ideological battles. In Grand Rapids, for example, students might travel to Rosa Parks Circle, a public plaza dedicated to the Civil Rights Leader only after a political firestorm was finally extinguished. Students could write about Parks, about the controversy itself, and even create a walking tour of similar spots in the city.

A check of eBay shows that my 1982 Texas Instruments computer is indeed worth something—about ten dollars or so, depending on the auction. My prediction—and my hope—is that tablet pcs, so full of promise for the English language arts, will take far less time to come down in price.