



Unplugged

One of the most exciting developments in personal computing today is the ability to connect in a wireless manner. Wireless technology replaces cables with radio waves, creating new flexibility and freedom of movement for users. For example, a computer that is wireless-equipped can be connected to the internet while it is nowhere near a network or phone modem port. While the most common use may be connecting to the internet, we can also use a keyboard, mouse and even a monitor without being bound by cables. However, we will focus on wireless internet in this column. Wireless internet access is probably most appealing to laptop computer users since they are already mobile. However, I have had a wireless network in my house for a few years and it makes moving desktop computers or adding a computer simple compared with the potential task of rewiring my house.

What's So Bad about Wires?

In fact, wiring school buildings presents an enormous expense when new computer labs are installed. Unless the wires are going to be exposed and dangling from the ceiling, a substantial amount of construction must occur. Walls, floors and ceilings must be altered to accommodate the extensive cables and associated hardware. This is one reason to consider a wireless alternative. It is also often wasteful to devote so much space to a computer-dedicated room that may often go unused. A wireless alternative can provide you with options you might have never considered in the past. There are other benefits from this technology in the school setting as well. If each classroom is currently equipped with one or two computers, the same amount of resources can rotate through classrooms so that each room is fully equipped on alternating days of the week. This kind of flexibility is likely to result in more successful use of technology since decisions can be made based on school or class need rather than being based on the limits of the technology available.

How Can I Try It Out?

A small investment (approximately \$35 per computer) allows users to connect their computers to any available wireless network. This will purchase plug and play card that immediately locates any signal that is available. It is very simple and non-technical for users. Universities, public libraries internet service providers and communities have all embraced this new technology so there are many opportunities to explore.

What if I Want More?

If you are interested in integrating wireless technology at your school, you can purchase a virtual classroom, or portable computer lab. This is a cart that consists of a wireless network hub, any number of laptop computers and other peripheral devices. The network hub simply plugs into an Ethernet network port (or even a phone line port) in order to connect to the internet. This cart can be rolled into any classroom and within seconds you have an instant computer lab without the space and money commitments of a conventional lab. There is no need for teachers to have

exceptional technological expertise since the computers automatically detect the signal from the hub. All you have to do is plug in the power and network connection.

What If I Still Want More?

Of course, you could also decide to permanently install some wireless hubs around your school. Each one will generally transmit a signal for a radius of 100-200 feet, depending on the thickness of walls, building materials and other environmental factors. However, the installation requires little more than plugging the hub into an electrical outlet and network port and assigning a password. This is what most universities have been doing over the past few years. This approach allows you to have complete mobility without having to haul a cart around. Anyone who has a laptop with a wireless card will be able to access email or internet services anywhere at any time. Students can be assigned laptops at the beginning of a school year or check them out at the beginning of a class or school day.

Unplugged Equals Unlimited

You may soon find that you enjoy using computers much more when you can do it on your own terms. Working with a small group of students in a room that has the perfect number of computers is quite different from taking such a class into a large cavernous computer lab. Once you realize how comfortable it is to reply to your email in a hammock or do your online searching while having coffee at the corner coffee shop, you may find it difficult to work on a conventional desktop computer in an office setting.

Find out more about vendors for wireless solutions and stories from schools who have been using them by visiting: <http://gregling.net/wire/>

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