
THE FUTURE ROLE OF CAMERAS IN K-12 CLASSROOMS

Article by Herb Rubenstein

INTRODUCTION

The technology available to the K-12 educational industry is changing rapidly. This author assisted the Montgomery Blair High School secure \$50,000 in funding to pay for TV's in each classroom to provide an administrative communication tool and educational programming device to the school. This article is about another type of communication device – the camera that picks up and transmits video images and audio recordings live of exactly what is going on in the classroom. While it is understood that many teachers, administrators and students may oppose the use of these cameras, the new technology that allows at very low cost the installation of these cameras and audio devices and the live viewing of and listening to what is going on in the classroom via the internet should make all of us take another hard look at the benefits of using these cameras and the internet. Consider bringing up that you are only suggesting a pilot program in the introduction—this makes people more likely to support your idea.

THE ROLE OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Most studies show that the more the parent is involved in the education of their children, the better the child does in school. However, how are parents ever to find out really what is going on in schools these days and what experience their child or children are having in the public school K-12 environment. Occasionally, parents can visit the school, though rarely are they invited to attend actual classes. Therefore, parents are shut out of observing their child or children's classroom or lunch experience, as well as their extracurricular activities experience. Technology exists today to put one to four cameras linked to the internet in the classrooms and parents, administrators and those given passwords are allowed to view exactly what is going on in the classroom by going to their personal computers and clicking on the internet site with exactly the camera angle that the parent seeks.

I believe that many parents would tune in via the internet and observe their child in class. For those parents who do not have internet access, centers at public libraries and other convenient locations can easily be established where they can go to view the entire educational experience their child is receiving whenever they want. [Since the classes would be recorded, a parent will be able at any time and look at the internet site and see that day's classes where his or her children were in class or previous day's classes.]—awkward sentence, unclear Parents would be accurately informed about how the child is interacting in class, behaving in class and learning in class and would be able to observe the teacher to learn more about how the teacher is teaching the class. I believe that the road to greater parent involvement will be to open the classroom up to the parent and internet based cameras are the least obtrusive way to do this. My personal opinion is that the parents who will view these videos are the parents who are already involved in their children's education. Getting uninvolved parents to care is not solved through the cameras idea. With the cost coming down and companies who may be willing to donate equipment and internet bandwidth, for the first time in history it is now feasible to design and implement a program of internet based cameras in the classroom.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST INTERNET BASED CAMERAS IN THE CLASSROOM

There are many technological reasons why such a large scale internet based camera program has never taken hold, but now these technological reasons are disappearing fast. There are other reasons that can be raised against such a program and some of these reasons include:

- Students do not want to be observed
- Teachers do not want to be observed
- This is an invasion of privacy
- Schools do not have the financial resources to implement this program

- Internet based cameras could lead to security problems
- The password system can be overridden and anyone could view the classroom
- It all seems like “big brother.”

These objections are, in fact, easily dealt with. Administrators and parents now have the right to attend class and observe both teachers and students—then why do they need the video streams?. The “observation” of the teachers and students via internet based cameras will be unobtrusive. Neither teachers nor students should be doing anything in the classroom and in extracurricular activities that they do not want observed by parents and administrators in any event. This is true, yet class debates and discussions are a vital part of learning—in my experience some of the best ways to learn—and cameras will put more pressure on students that will prevent them from expressing controversial viewpoints. A big part of learning is getting the wrong answer, and in classrooms where students are already self-conscious about speaking out, they will be less likely to even take a chance and speak in class.

This is not an invasion of privacy. Our Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly that students do not have privacy rights in schools, and neither do teachers. I am not suggesting cameras in the teachers’ lounge or in the bathrooms. I am suggesting in the most public places of our schools, classrooms, [hallways, cafeterias, school grounds]—you do not mention this until now, consider leaving this proposal only to cameras in classrooms so you deal with less complicated issues. and [places where extracurricular activities take place,] internet based cameras should be installed.

The argument that internet based classroom cameras could lead to security problems is absurd. In fact, they may have a huge positive impact on classroom discipline, on the ability to immediately spot and intruder or the beginning of any act of violence. By creating parents and administrators as observers, parents and administrators may be able to spot a situation that is likely to become violent, alert security guards and prevent violence from occurring.

[The final criticism is that it all seems like big brother. This is pure nonsense. The Super Bowl is shown to billions of people around the world, live. No one has ever accused the National Football League of using big brother tactics to show the world a football game.]—I personally think that this section should be cut from the paper. I don’t really see the relation between the two situations, and the comparison you draw is unfounded and a little confusing. The observation of the classroom by parents, administrators and other interested parties will make these groups better partners in education and better participants in the educational process of their child or children.

A PILOT PROGRAM

The use of cameras in the classroom is easily established as a pilot program. The program could start in areas such as Las Vegas that is far advanced in technology in public schools. It is? The rewiring of schools to accommodate this new internet based program can be done on a school by school basis with money sought from foundations, parent drives like the one I managed to raise \$50,000 for TV’s for Montgomery Blair High School—perhaps expand on success in this high school and clarify what happened there and other creative funding approaches (e.g., donations from technology and telecom companies) could be used to start the process.

There are be many educational uses for having all of the classroom experience recorded. [When a student is sick, he or she could observe the class. If a student wanted to review material presented in class, he or she could do so via the internet.]—this is a very good point, perhaps bring up earlier in paper Public schools could package and sell the rights to observe the classes to home schooled children and deliver [as MIT is planning to do internet based recordings of its classes throughout the world.] I’m not sure about this example. To me it seems a bit random in the flow of the sentence, but the home-schooling point is a good one.

CONCLUSION

I urge all groups interested in improving K-12 public school education in the United States to consider implementing a pilot program quickly to find out the potential for this approach to achieve positive benefits for students, for administrators and for parents. A careful evaluation of all effects of the program should be undertaken. We can be sure that there will be unintended consequences of this program, but many of these unintended consequences could be very beneficial to improving the delivery of education by teachers in the United

States and improving the receipt of education by students in the United States. [I believe that students, if they knew they were being observed by their parents would perform better, have higher discipline and would be more engaged in the school process. I also believe they would cut fewer classes, be less likely to drop out and would be less disruptive and less disdainful of those students who are trying to excel.] These are really good points;

bring them up earlier on and expand. I think this program could raise the standards in the industry significantly and look forward to a broad and deep debate on this topic.