The Notebook
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At least three incidents have led to these reflections on the notebook as a tool for learning. Firstly, I saw an interesting movie some time ago about a young woman who had developed a proof for an unsolved mathematical problem, which she had recorded in a notebook. The notebook played an important role in the storyline in ensuring that the proof was not lost. The second was the revelation by an early-morning announcer that on that day in history Leonardo Da Vinci's notebook had been sold for 5 million pounds. Finally, I recently read the autobiography of Paul Feyerabend, a philosopher of science, where he stated: "A few weeks ago, I found some notebooks covering part of the period between 1960 to 1972…. There are comments on plays, movies, concerts, and operas…Detailed reviews of performances and books alternate with stream-of-consciousness accounts of my moods."

These incidents have caused me to reflect on the current and potential uses of the notebook in the school system, and to highlight its role in creative versus non-productive tasks.

As we all know, a notebook, along with a dozen copybooks, is a standard item on booklists. These school supplies are examples of fairly low-end and quite commonplace paper-based technology, and are often used as instruments of accountability. Many teachers express the view that parents expect students' notebooks to be filled with notes as proof of work done in class—the more notes given the more satisfied the parents! To meet these expectations, teachers dictate notes which students copy into their notebooks and/or copybooks.

Although routinely and consistently done, both teachers and students are quite likely to describe the note-giving/note-taking activity as boring, that is, not engaging. Therefore, in a context which values the principle that learners must be actively engaged (minds-on engagement) in constructing their knowledge, its pedagogical value/utility is questionable. Many teachers are aware that telling is not teaching and that note-giving, coupled with assessment practices that require recall, encourages rote memorisation and surface learning that is forgotten sometimes as soon as, if not before, the students leave the examination room. However, some teachers are unaware of strategies that can be used to help students to engage in meaningful learning, and they use the note-giving "teaching strategy" as a method of classroom management. In such cases, the appearance of "good" pupil behaviour takes precedence over the types of active learning activities that facilitate higher-order learning outcomes, but which may generate classroom "noise."

However, the notebook could be used to have students actively engaged and still maintain a low level of noise. For example, the notebook could be used as a learning log, a double-entry journal, or a reflective journal [see http://www.maslibraries.org/infolit/samplers/spring/doub.html for a discussion of the use of these tools], which could serve for brainstorming or for students to synthesise and document their thoughts and ideas about concepts presented, either through narrative or graphics. Such tasks would provide

opportunities for students to use the notebook in a similar manner to Da Vinci and Feyerabend. Observation suggests that the potential of this commonplace technology is unfulfilled in many classrooms in Trinidad and Tobago. Interestingly, even with the introduction of computers in classrooms, the potential of technology could be similarly unfilled.

Developments in electronic technology have led to the emergence of the "Notebook" [a small portable computer]. The expectation might be that the introduction of such technology into the school system would automatically enhance learning and creativity in the classroom. If this were so, it might then become routine for students to select areas of interest for study, engage in research, evaluate the information gathered, and develop and/or discuss their assignments on blogs that they, or their teachers, design for this purpose and to reflect upon their learning. In other words, the notebook computer could also be used, among other functions, to create double-entry journals or learning logs.

However, the use of computer technology for such activities is not guaranteed if teachers are not trained for this use; are resistant to the change or technophobic; are unaware of the resources available; or if the software programs to which they are exposed encourage rote learning. If used for drill and practice only, computer work becomes as uncreative an activity as the traditional note-taking activity. It is evident, then, that the learning outcomes of teacher/pupil interactions are not necessarily dependent on the technology that is employed but on the use to which the technology is put. Consequently, the teacher has a significant role in determining the outcomes achieved.

We should continue to investigate ways of using whatever technology is at our disposal to achieve a wide range of learning outcomes. However, as we embrace the new technologies, let us not forget that the simple, low-end, paper-based technology—the notebook—could also serve these multiple dimensions.

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