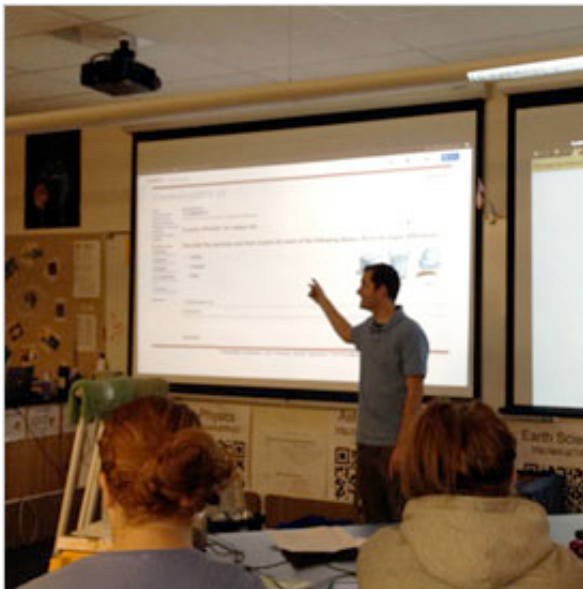


New York, NY
December 7, 2011
Online Circulation: 1,510,312 visitors/month



Challenging the Education Status Quo

London Jenks, a young Wyoming school teacher, is changing education with smartphones and iPads.



Nestled in the Big Horn Basin of north-central Wyoming, surrounded by rolling, snow-capped mountains and the expansive blue sky is Thermopolis, a small town of about 3,200 people. If you've heard of Thermopolis at all, it is likely for its distinction of containing the world's largest mineral hot springs (as its Greek name implies). What

may surprise you is that Thermopolis is also the place where one of the country's most innovative technology experiments is taking place. This experiment is not housed in a secret government lab or Apple testing facility. Rather, it is in the classrooms of Thermopolis High School. At the forefront of this effort is a 26-year-old science teacher named London Jenks who has a passion for tech and a teaching philosophy that challenges the education status quo.

Plugging In

While other teachers are entrenched in a never-ending battle to get students to put away their smartphones and tablets, Jenks is putting them to use in his lesson plans. Upon entering Jenks's classroom, each student is handed an [Apple iPad](#) (made possible by grants from the Wyoming Department of Education and the Hot Springs School District). Students can personalize their iPads and, basically, have open access to the Web. With the devices, they complete assignments, collaborate with other students (even those in other classes), use science-based apps, and go on research scavenger hunts by scanning QR codes with clues to the next location. Jenks's physics, earth science, astronomy, and chemistry classrooms are largely paperless. They store assignments and other class documents in [Google Docs](#).

A native of Twin Falls, Idaho, Jenks is a Brigham-Young graduate and the recipient of the Knowles Science Teacher Fellowship, which offers financial support and academic guidance for Jenks's technology initiative. He was also chosen to be one of 50 teachers nationwide to attend the Google Teacher Academy, where he received advanced training on Google's various education tools.

To facilitate a high-tech learning environment, each classroom has its own access point capable of 8-Mbps download speeds. There is also a full-time IT person to handle tech support. Thermopolis recently received fiber optic lines, which Jenks hopes will be the next step for the school.

Critics of Jenks's approach—or technology in the classroom in general—say that such devices are not tools but rather toys to socialize, distract, and basically skirt "real learning." Jenks disagrees. "Technology is a way to draw students in, as long as they are using

those tools," Jenks says. "If they're not engaged, they're going to be distracted and disruptive regardless of whether there are iPads in the classroom or not."

He adds that according to a survey the school conducted, about 80 percent of parents supported the technology initiative.

Hindrances to a High-Tech Classroom

A big hindrance to using technology effectively in the classroom, Jenks says, is a lack of training and understanding by both teachers and parents. Thus, the Hot Springs School District is aggressive about training teachers on the application of tablets, smartphones, and other devices in the classroom. And during parent-teacher conferences, Jenks puts iPads on display for parents to use to see what their kids are doing.

And what about students using the Internet—that place where vast academic possibilities and idiotic, offensive content coexist? Jenks says that because school is a place where kids go to gain both knowledge and a social code of conduct, why shouldn't school be the place they also go to learn proper, responsible Web surfing? Though Thermopolis High adheres to all state and federal laws regarding content filtering and password protection, putting in overly rigid firewalls and safeguards also keeps out the content you need for research (completely blocking YouTube, for example). There are tools to help minimize students' access to questionable material and ensure safer searching, Jenks says, such as [Google Scholar](#) and [YouTube's new Education site](#). Instead of students doing most of their Web surfing at home—often unsupervised and without safeguards—most Internet use by Thermopolis High students is done in school; not to mention that in this rural community, a number of students live

beyond the reach of Internet service.

A Next-Gen Lesson Plan

So why iPads? Jenks says that, along with a straightforward user interface and minimal IT hassles, the iPad also has the largest selection of apps available for science students. (Jenks also tested and liked the [Motorola Xoom](#), but the app selection wasn't quite there yet.) And, as mentioned, students can also shoot photos, take video, and scan with the infrared capability. For example, seniors in the Spanish classes shot videos of vocabulary and pronunciation lessons for underclassmen to study. This type of collaborative learning (in which students are teaching each other as well as teachers teaching students) is the future of education.

Jenks stresses that his classroom is not just another example of schools using technology for technology's sake. Often, teachers are obligated to use technology donated to schools or acquired by the district without a clear sense of how it will integrate with the curriculum (see: Oregon Trail).

"You can always add peripheral technology to any lesson. But it's about how to make it essential to the lesson," Jenks says.

Jenks makes sure that the technology is a vital part of the lesson, as essential to learning as a microscope or protractor. Jenks is constantly looking for new and better apps to use in the classroom. He says he's even been contacted by developers to discuss creating or improving science apps.

Another common hindrance to using technology in the classroom is money. Many school districts cannot afford to buy every student an iPad. But Jenks says it's all about "using what you have," even if that means bringing your laptop from home. And in so doing, Jenks

believes, teachers can raise the caliber of their profession and teach students to "become producers rather than just consumers."