Letter from the Editor-in-Chief:
There’s an App for That

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Students (and instructors) are coming to class with mobile phones, laptops, tablets, iPods and iPads. We have entered an age of mobility in which we are all connected through social and information networks. Once again, we are asking, “How can we use the new technologies to enhance our teaching, while informing students about its appropriate use and protecting our privacy in this ever changing landscape?” It is all too easy for us to simply ask our students to leave their technology at the classroom door. We have to accept that mobility is here and students are plugged into it. We will not be able to pull the plug, but can seek ways to use what is out there to our advantage.

Mobile computing has been around for over a decade, even though it seems that mobile devices have just arrived. In the late 90’s handheld devices, such as the Jornada 720, and PDAs, like the Dell Axim, hit the scene. We knew then that the mobile student was on the way. PDAs led to what we now call smart phones. Also, tablet computers appeared at the turn of the century. Those at the forefront of instructional technology worked on developing applications like Student Response Systems and imagined location services applications in which students would collaborate and print their papers from a Starbucks across town. Early studies showed that students easily adapted to the new portable devices. Unfortunately, the world was not ready for PDAs and Tablet computers a decade ago. This was just the beginning. Mobile technology was soon done right by Steve Jobs and others. The iPod, iPhone and now iPad, have lead the way into how mobile technologies would infiltrate the masses and change the way we access information. These devices have made access to Web 2.0 computing (the dynamic elements of Internet and social networks of the last decade) easier and we have entered a new age (Web 3.0) with ever more access to data and programs in the Cloud. (See my October 2009 JET editorial.)

With the rise of mobility, we have recently seen the appearance of the “App.” Apps were introduced by Apple through the iPod Touch and iPhone, and are now more pronounced with the iPad and Android systems. Even Microsoft is getting into the act with their Metro system in Windows 8. So, what are Apps? These are small programs, originally designed for Apple products that can simply link to websites like YouTube, CNN, Netflix, and Facebook; provide full-fledged programs for editing text, graphics or video; manage personal data; or, deliver games and entertainment. There are free apps and commercial

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apps from 99 cents to tens of dollars. They run on smart phones and the new tablets. In fact, there are also Web-Apps, which run independently of the devices. At the core, they cater to our need for information access, our shrinking attention spans, and our ever growing need to stay connected while at work, home, during the day, and at night. The problem for educators is to determine if there is any pedagogical use, or even productive use of these apps. Many will prefer to use desktops and laptops for major productive work, but the new devices are designed to aid in how we consume information.

What type of apps are there? There is no limit to what types of apps there are. If you can think of a need, then “there (probably) is an app for that.” Of the hundreds of thousands of apps, many are simple novelties, while some are actually quite useful. (See Figure 1.)

Podcasts – Many podcasts feature audio or video collections of radio programs, lectures, and news items. There is now an app for iTunes U, which brings university courses from many classrooms.

Presentation Software – Apps like Keynote and QuickOffice allow not only the ability to present talks, but also provide simple editing capabilities.

Document readers – Most of our documents are in the form of PDFs or MS Office docs. There are readers and editors for accessing your documents and annotating them.

Note Taking – There are lots of apps for note taking. Students can organize and share their notes. Some even allow the embedding of images or audio record lectures.

File Sharing – You can access your documents from the Cloud through services like GoogleDocs, or share documents with your other devices through file sharing systems like DropBox or storing notes with Evernote.

Books – There are apps to access your Kindle, Nook, or Audible accounts to E-books.

Papers – There are apps for finding scholarly articles, like ArXiv, or saving citation collections, such as Mendeley.

Mathematics – There are many types of calculators, from emulations of the old HP calculators to apps which run common software worksheets for MATLAB and Maple. There has also been an app for the computational engine – Wolframalpha.

Miscellaneous Programs – One can use Google Maps to create new maps, Codea to program, Video Physics for data acquisition, and pUniverse to explore the night sky.

Compilations – There are many wonderful collections on topics such as Jazz, the Civil War, Cookbooks, and The Elements.

This is just a small collection of app types. There are apps for graphics and video editing, dictionaries, organizing Wikipedia entries, or exploring the night sky. Blogs and wikis can be accessed and edited using a simple app. Many news outlets and featured content can be found such as TIME, NPR, CBC, BBC, TED Talks, and NPR. Live radio programs and movie applications add to the entertainment collection. You can even use Skype, and other Voice over the Internet (VOIP) services. All the while one can keep up with their social networking using the FaceBook app. Finally, you can read and create QR Codes, the codes now being used by shoppers to link to added information. (See the inside cover of this issue.) The growth of apps, access to information 24-7, and all that the apps can do has helped define what we mean by the Information Age and how we will navigate it. How we use and assess apps in and out of the classroom will be up to us.
Figure 1. Examples of Apps for an iPad 2.