Notebook computers
They’re back

THE NOTEBOOK COMPUTER HAS SERVED US WELL SINCE THE 1990S, BUT IT WILL SOON BE SUPERSEDED, RIGHT? WRONG, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

MY BELIEF, A FEW YEARS AGO, WAS THAT the notebook computer was approaching the end of its useful life. It had served us well since the 1990s, but it would soon be superseded – and I thought it would certainly have been superseded by now. I thought there would be desktop computers everywhere, available in motels, shops, cafes and waiting rooms. I expected we’d be able to use any public computer, hot desking, downloading data and software quickly.

That hasn’t been my experience.

I’ve just returned from the United States where internet cafes are few and far between, and difficult to find. Frustratingly, I found the internet advertised as free and available everywhere, but without a notebook computer there was no access, a point I made to one of my American friends. ‘We’re not a third world country,’ he replied. ‘We have notebook computers!’ And so they do. People use them in shops, on buses, at camping grounds, even sitting on the footpath.

One day, in my tragic desperation to email a friend, I rushed into a store that sold computers and pleaded to use one of their machines. They had one desktop computer for public use, but – as I found – the last person to use it had been a kid who’d changed the password. Now even the shop was locked out of their own computer!

Clearly the notebook was ubiquitous in America, a ubiquity that’s been made possible because they’re so cheap in the US and will soon be throughout the world. The notebook is no longer that precious, expensive possession that we guarded with our life.

Maybe Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is on to something after all. Giving computers to students was a good idea in 1990 and it continues to be a good idea in 2008. How the computer is technically supported and how teachers are prepared for their general entry into all classrooms is another matter, but in a world where students from wealthier families have such a personal and educative support in a notebook computer, it’s important that less well-off students are not disadvantaged by being denied access not just to a machine, but to the world.

You’ll probably think I was foolish to travel overseas without my notebook. It’s the first time I’ve done this since I’ve owned one. My thinking was that since the trip was a holiday I could enjoy myself more without one. I bought a cheap mobile phone on arrival in the US, which gave me text and voice contact, but that, I soon found out, wasn’t enough. It’s not just that the keyboard is an easier input device for me; I wanted to store, edit and even send my photos to my family as I travelled; and I wanted to take time to write creatively and discursively as well as to be able to access data easily.

As it turned out, I was frustrated by my lack of a notebook, even or especially on a holiday.

As you might guess, I’m writing this month’s Reflective Principle on my notebook computer. Instead of doing this in the study, I’ve brought it into the living room and am sitting in a comfortable chair with it on my knee. For some reason I didn’t want to write at the desk. I don’t know why. Fortunately, the notebook allows me flexibility, even to be sensitive to my unpredictable emotions!

Isn’t that a good thing?

Yes, I look forward to the day when the notebook computer is replaced by a device that has no keyboard for the input of data. How wonderful when that device will take voice input, respond to voice commands and allow us to interrogate data through the spoken word.

Yes, I also look forward to the notebook computer becoming even cheaper and smaller, maybe even becoming small enough to wear, because I don’t enjoy carrying the existing machine and its battery charger.

Back in 1990, when students first began to get their personal notebook computers, I remember hearing from a parent that her daughter took her computer to bed with her, storing it under the pillow because it was her precious possession.

I don’t take mine to bed, and don’t intend to do so in the future, no matter how small they become, but I do cherish my notebook computer and take it with me as my personal aide. It should surely be possible for all young people in Australia to have such a personal friend and helper.

Notebook computers are back. Let’s commit to making them available to all students, even when they go on holidays.

David Loader is an education consultant and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. His latest book is Jousting for the New Generation, published by ACER Press.

Email davidloader@bigpond.com