Conversations on Technology
Overwhelmed by the technology?

prepared for

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This conversation also is available from the Learning Through Technology web site, 
http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/nise/cl1/lt/
Conversations on Technology: Overwhelmed by the technology?

Question #2:
"I use computers every day for e-mail, word processing and spreadsheets, but I'm not a technology wizard. I'm really concerned that I'm going to be overwhelmed by the technical challenges of starting up, and even worse by maintenance once I have things up and running. Did you feel this way? How has it turned out for you?"

At first I felt that way too, but you don't have to be on the "cutting edge" of technology. Talk to your colleagues. Find out what kinds of technology work best for them in their field. Then invest yourself in the more "tried and true" types of technology. Also there is much help available in most academic organizations. Computer services and educational technology services has a myriad of service available to faculty that you can use to get started, improve your skills and maintain technology in which you invest. I personally am no computer geek, but I run a computer network that is interface with chemistry probes and tutorial software. With the help of some computer adept students, faculty and computer services it runs quite smoothly.

You are right, it's a pain. Stick to one kind of software that is well supported by your institution. Use and adjust, if necessary, modules and data sets that colleagues have developed and used on students already. Know what you want students to get out of the exercise and make sure they get it by demanding that they analyze and write about their results.

Yes and you need to take this into consideration. You need good and dependable technical assistance.

There is an interesting story here. I learned computing with a mainframe and punch cards and then moved to terminals and now to PC's. It was a challenge every step of the way for me to master technology while teaching a full load of four courses. I started by using what I knew and moved it into the classes I taught as I learned it. Even my non-science class had to do a spreadsheet assignment after I learned to use spreadsheets. I told them to find a buddy to help them. That is what I did. I asked my husband lots of questions and
applied spreadsheets to our mutual research project as soon as I could. We published a paper using the data analysis we did with that first spreadsheet, SuperCalc3. I pushed spreadsheets into the p-chem course as soon as I had moderate skill. Why not. It is like any other instrument you can't wait till it is perfected or your skill is perfected. It is experimentation to include it.

I took workshops and still go to them to get ideas from others more experienced than I and less experienced than I. I recently went to one here on campus and learned what the Education folks are asking their students to do. Very interesting. they conduce a whole class through a discussion board even if the students are in the computer lab at the same time. This gives them the means to archive all comments and reflect on them. Sometimes the best learning is through reflection. Such reflection is similar to you and I here discussing IT. You are forcing me to reflect and that is good.

Again how do I know, ...by observation of student behavior.

Do I still feel frustrated. Boy do I, especially when I have too little time and the html formatting is not doing what I expect it to do. I feel overwhelmed all the time. However, I am too busy to dwell on this. I just push and push to learn what I need to know to continue. I ask lots of questions and get help from the wonderful IT staff we have here on campus.

Observation helps to. Imitate excellence when you see it.

My experience has been very positive. It does take some time to get up to speed, but not a huge amount. Also, you can start slowly and add more each year. Most of the time is well spent, since you also become more familiar with the tools and you then can use them in new ways.

It is very challenging. I am preparing Powerpoint slides with lots of equations and technical terms on them. I had to purchase a supplemental equation editor to do this. It was quite intuitive to learn, but nevertheless it did require some time on my part to become proficient with it. I let a TA publish my material to the course web page, and do not do it myself.

Be sure that you have the full support of your college or university as you begin activities with the Internet. Many times your institution will not have a clue as to
what the real maintenance needs of an on-line approach to a course really means. Initially, any change in what you do in a course is time-consuming.

**You can start by using commercial materials** and have a technician or a knowledgeable student help you using the technology. You will be surprised at how easy it really is. Depending on which of many possible models you follow for technology use, the issue of equipment failure is a serious one. You need to use equipment that is under the auspices of an organization with good maintenance facilities and personnel.

**The technical challenges are minor.** If you know how to insert a CD and click a few icons, you are in good shape. The main problem is selecting what is good and useful.

**The learning curve may be steep with some options,** e.g., lectures in Tool Book® or Powerpoint®, perhaps less in distance learning lectures and discussions, more-so in group web site activities.