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Back to Campus with a Projector in Your Pocket

Will pico projectors be the next "must-have" gadget that students take to college this September, along with their notebook computers, cell phones and music players?

Pico projectors - compact, handheld devices that can beam video, movies, photos and presentations onto nearly any surface - will likely make their way into university dorm rooms and classrooms in 2010-11, says Robin Raskin, former tech journalist and founder of the HigherEd Tech Summit held in January at theConsumer Electronics Show. "College students, while avid users of digital devices, have serious space and budget constraints. They're always on the lookout for a single solution for all their viewing needs. Pico projectors fit the bill."

Pocket-sized pico projectors can connect to - and pull images and video from - cell phones, laptops, digital cameras and other mobile devices so users can more easily share media with one another. Pico projectors usually consist of a miniature projection "engine" that includes a light source, optics and electronics.

Indeed, pico projectors have gone from futuristic prototypes to available products seemingly overnight. According to a recent report from analyst firm DisplaySearch, pico projector shipment revenue totaled $117 million in 2009 and is expected to reach $13.9 billion in 2018.

Among college students, these little projectors may be particularly convenient and compelling as learning tools, as video in the form of YouTube, podcasts, webcams, conferencing, webinars, Flipcam and iPhone clips, web chat, and telepresence become commonplace in higher education.

"The introduction of video into almost every aspect of our learning and work tasks is profound and 'disrupting,'" the educational futurist and researcher Elliott Masie wrote recently. "...Rising bandwidth, lowered equipment costs, ease of editing and growing expectations of learners will make video a profound component of our learning efforts going forward."

Video certainly adds a new dimension to education, especially for students who are visual learners. But big-screen TVs and accessory monitors take up much precious space in cramped dorm rooms or student apartments, and typically cost upwards of $1,000. By comparison, pico projectors are tiny and relatively affordable.

Take, for example, the SHOWWX(TM) laser pico projector, from Microvision of Redmond, Washington. Only the size of a deck of cards, the SHOWWX (pronounced "SHOW," "W," "X") easily plugs into any device with video out such as an iPod, iPhone, iPad or notebook computer. In a dark environment, the SHOWWX can project a large WVGA, 16:9, high-quality image at up to 100" diagonal.

By design, SHOWWX is not as bright as a big traditional stationary projector but it's completely mobile, and when room lights are low, the SHOWWX is positively brilliant. SHOWWX works well on nearly any projection surface: a wall, a bed sheet, a piece of poster board, or even the ceiling of a dimly lit dorm room.

Having trouble with Shakespeare's masterwork Othello? It's a lot easier to remember after watching the Reduced Shakespeare Company abridged and humorous version, while sharing it with a few classmates on a study room wall. What about projecting historical maps on a white-board or flip chart and drawing over the image with a standard marker? Watching virtual reality tours of Egyptian burial cities, animated complex mathematical surfaces, and surveys of art history? The vivid, laser-driven color and large image size of the SHOWWX adds to the richness of shared video learning.

When it's time for a study break, the SHOWWX plus a Netflix movie playing on your laptop, or downloaded videos on your iPod or iPhone, can make a dorm room feel more like a home theater. And no matter where you shine the SHOWWX laser pico projector, the image is always in focus.

At least one college student has gone beyond the expected with Microvision's enabling technology: a pico projector laser display engine. Natan Linder, a master's degree candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) Media Laboratory, is getting $15,000 in development funds from Audi for his LuminAR invention, an Internet-accessing digital light bulb and desk lamp combo that uses Microvision's display engine to project web content as it follows hand gestures toward a table, floor, wall or ceiling.

Inventors notwithstanding, most students who bring a pico projector to campus this Fall will be taking advantage of a cool, new gadget that lets them play a movie or make a presentation anywhere.

For her part, HigherEd Tech Summit's Raskin enthusiastically recommends Microvision's SHOWWX, one of 10 products chosen to represent the top trends at her CES 2010 showcase earlier this year. "We've all seen portable projectors," she wrote recently, "but this one takes the cake."

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