Multitasking, wireless printing come to iPad

New software could help make iPhones, iPads more useful classroom tools

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Nov 23rd, 2010

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The new software update includes a printing option and the ability to multitask.

Apple Inc. released new software on Nov. 22 that lets users of its iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad devices print wirelessly over Wi-Fi networks. The software addresses what has been a key complaint about the iPad to date—that users can't print their documents from the tablet—and ed-tech observers say it could help spur more widespread use of the device in schools.

Apple first described some of the new features in iOS 4.2, the latest operating system for the Apple gadgets, at a media event in September.

The iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad don't have ports for hooking up with printers, which makes the AirPrint feature one of the biggest advances for all of Apple's gadgets. With the new software, the gadgets can find printers on home or school networks, then send text, photos, or graphics directly to the printer over Wi-Fi. To start, iPads, iPhones, or iPods with AirPrint will only work directly with certain Hewlett-Packard Co. printers.

The software update also includes AirPlay, which lets iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch users send video, music, and photos directly from the gadgets to the TV screen through the company's Apple TV set-top box. Someone who is watching a movie on the go on an iPad could walk into his or her living room or dorm room and switch to the TV with a few taps. Apple also said special AirPlay-enabled speakers for streaming music will be on sale in the coming months.

In addition, Apple said it is making its Find My iPhone application available without charge for owners of the iPhone 4, the iPad, and the latest iPod Touch model. The app helps people find their missing device on a map; users also can remotely lock or delete data from a lost device, which could help with data security on campus.

The update brings many features already available for iPhones and the iPod Touch to the iPad, including a form of multitasking, or the ability to keep some programs running in the background while doing other things. For example, users will be able to start up the Pandora music program and keep listening while switching to another application. The update also makes switching between programs faster.

With the new software, iPad users also can consolidate multiple eMail accounts into one inbox, play games against other Apple gadget owners, and rent TV episodes from the iTunes app.

This is the iPad's first holiday season on the market, and Apple is positioning the software update as another reason to buy.

"iOS 4.2 makes the iPad a completely new product, just in time for the holiday season," said CEO Steve Jobs in a statement.

Users can download the new software by syncing their devices with iTunes.

Ed-tech observers said the new software is a significant upgrade that could help further position the iPhone and iPad as instructional tools.

"This update is most welcome for those who have iPhones, iPod Touches, and iPads," said Ray Schroeder, professor emeritus and director of the University of Illinois at Springfield's Center for Online Learning, Research, and Service. "It will make a huge difference to those of us who teach with these tools. We had been using workarounds such as dropbox.com to shift documents to other devices for printing. With so many schools and colleges providing iPads to students, these upgrades will have an immediate impact on teaching and learning."

Schroeder said the top complaints he had heard before Apple's announcement were the iPad's lack of multitasking, lack of organizing folders, and inability to print documents.

"This puts the iPad once again at the head of the ever-growing pack of tablet slates," he said. "[The new software] addresses nearly all of the concerns of educators at this point; it really adds to the value and utility of the iPad in the classroom."

He said educators always welcome any improvements that will enhance a device's accessibility for students or instructors with disabilities—and toward that end, the new Apple software's "Braille support and voice over keyboard control option are helpful.

Jim Hirsch, associate superintendent for technology at the Plano Independent School District in Texas, was more cautious in his assessment of the new software and its potential impact.

"Printing is a critical operation, as is editing," Hirsch said. "The printing is still weak, with only support for a single HP printer included, and Apple still is not providing [the ability] to allow full editing of web-based applications. Fortunately, Google decided to modify [its] Docs apps rather than wait for Apple to include that support in the new iOS."

Still, Hirsch said, "this is a definite move in the right direction for printing and holds good promise for the future of the iPad [and] iPhone" in schools.