



NEO NEWS

By AlphaSmart™/Renaissance Learning™



Your source for news, product upgrades, and more for NEO laptops used in the K-12 classroom.

May 2008



Schools nationwide are catching on to why the NEO is the "Better Laptop for Schools".

FEATURE STORIES

[Maximize your Accelerated Reader experience with NEO 2](#)

I have always said that I would never dream of teaching again without the help of Accelerated Reader. But, I need to clarify that a bit now. Once the NEO 2 laptops came out—designed, among other things, to run AR quizzes—I now believe that I could never even try to use Accelerated Reader without the NEO 2!

[AlphaSmarts for Africa Update](#)

Thanks to help from you, thousands of AlphaSmart laptops are set to ship to Kenya schools in response to AlphaSmarts for Africa. [Read more...](#)

21st Century Grant winners announced

[21st Century Grant enables 1:1 computing for second-grade classroom](#)

It's not often that second graders top the priority list for access to technology, so when Faranak Drake found a grant opportunity to add a SmartOption Mobile Lab to her classroom, she jumped at the chance. [Read more...](#)

[Wisconsin school to conduct experiment measuring writing improvement with NEO 2s](#)

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Checking in with the 2007 AlphaGrant Winners

[Portable NEO laptops are ideal for Iowa School for the Deaf's environmental program](#)

We followed up with this 2007 AlphaGrant winner school to see how their Roots & Shoots project went using the NEO laptops. [Read more...](#)

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Discover how all-new NEO 2
can transform your school!

Product News



[Accelerated Reader Quizzing Now Available on NEO 2](#)

On April 10, we released the latest version of AlphaSmart Manager 2, version 3.0. What does this have to do with Accelerated Reader quizzing? Well, the latest version of AlphaSmart Manager 2 includes the new Accelerated Reader SmartApplet and an updated version of the Wireless Server Utility that is needed to communicate with Accelerated Reader on Renaissance Place. [Read More...](#)

Gardening project germinates students' writing interest

Growing Learners—a community gardening project that combines hands-on learning, parental involvement, and technology—has sprouted at Summerfield Elementary in Riverview, Florida, with help from a cart of NEO laptops.

[Read more...](#)

Student Writing Spotlight

Read the fabulous mystery written on an AlphaSmart laptop by Devon, a seventh-grade girl from Dallas, Texas.

[Read more...](#)

NEO Best Practice Tips

With the April release of the Accelerated Reader SmartApplet on NEO 2, it is now possible for students to take their Accelerated Reader Renaissance Place quizzes on NEO 2. To make the quizzing experience even faster and more enjoyable for students, try using the Student Reading Logs available through Renaissance Place. [Read more...](#)

Conference Appearances

[Click here](#) to see where we're going to be. Stop by and visit us at the Renaissance Learning booth!

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Maximize your Accelerated Reader experience with NEO 2

Marian Staton, Senior Vice President of Sales, Renaissance Learning

Ever since I was a school librarian, and later, as president of the Texas Association of School Librarians, I've always been a huge fan of Accelerated Reader. Having seen the difference firsthand that it can make in helping inspire a child's lifelong love of reading, I have always said that I would never dream of teaching again without the help of Accelerated Reader.

But, I need to clarify that a bit now. Once the NEO 2 laptops came out—designed, among other things, to run AR quizzes—I now believe that I could never even try to use Accelerated Reader without the NEO 2!

Why? Those of you using AR already know that computer resources can sometimes be tight when your kids are clamoring to take an AR quiz all at once. That's why the NEO 2's ability to run AR quizzes is truly priceless. With a cart of 30 NEO 2s and Accelerated Reader Renaissance Place, your students can now take AR quizzes right at their desks, or anywhere within range of the receiver. That means you won't have to maintain expensive desktop computers for this purpose, which can lower the overall cost of Accelerated Reader. Plus, your students will have more time for reading more books and taking more AR quizzes, thereby multiplying their reading skills in the process.

These handy little laptops do so much more than run AR quizzes. They're the perfect way to easily and cost-effectively enable 1:1 computing in your classroom. The NEO 2 can increase writing practice and improve student writing performance, too. Plus, NEO 2 can help you gather on-the-fly assessment data to help you gauge student understanding and inform your instruction.

You just have to see the NEO 2 in action to fully realize the difference this can make in your classroom! If you want to take a further look, I invite you to call (800) 656-6740 today for a demo on what NEO 2 can really do.

Enjoy this issue of NEO News!

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Thanks to help from you, thousands of AlphaSmart laptops are set to ship to Kenya

Thank you to everyone who participated in the AlphaSmarts for Africa program!

Because of your amazing generosity, we received nearly 5,000 donated laptops from nearly 400 schools and individuals across the country. It's truly amazing knowing that all of these laptops came from educators and students like you, whose actions will make a huge and lasting difference in the lives of schoolchildren in Kenya.

The AlphaSmarts for Africa program was set up to help teach fundamental skills to Kenyan students in areas where illiteracy rates are as high as 93%. Through the donated, older-model AlphaSmart laptops, Northern Kenya teachers will be able to introduce technology into their classrooms, helping to prepare students for today's high-tech world.

So, what's next? We've already started to prepare the laptops for their journey by equipping them with fresh batteries and updated software, and making minor repairs if necessary. Generation for Change and Growth (GCG), a non-profit aid organization, will then distribute the donated AlphaSmart laptops to Kenyan schools and provide valuable training for teachers on how to use them in their classrooms in mid-July 2008.

Again, thank you so much for your donation. Without it, these promising young minds might never get to experience technology in their classrooms and schools.



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One NEO Per Child: 21st Century Grant enables 1:1 computing for second-grade classroom

“Pure excitement!”

That’s how Faranak Drake, second-grade teacher at Loch Lomond Elementary, Manassas, Virginia, described her reaction to receiving the Renaissance Learning 21st Century Writing Grant award last March. “We are so delighted to have the opportunity to introduce our students to NEO 2s in second grade,” Drake said. “Most of our students do not have computers at home and love using these small and easy-to-use computers in the classroom.”

It’s not often that second graders top the priority list for access to technology, so when Drake found a grant opportunity to add a SmartOption Mobile Lab to her classroom, she jumped at the chance. “Until now, there were only a limited number of AlphaSmart laptops available for the entire school—the upper grades have always had priority,” she said. “This is the first time that our second graders will have the opportunity to use the NEO 2s, and having ‘One NEO Per Child’ is very exciting!”

The idea behind Drake’s “Read to Write” portfolio project came after reading a Denver Public Schools study that used NEOs to strengthen seven areas of students’ writing. The study found that NEOs improved idea development, organization, sentence fluency, and text length, as well as students’ motivation to write.

Drake also incorporated a survey asking elementary students, “What do you need to make you a better writer?” Responses included: a good imagination and patience; good ideas; writing practice; concentration and confidence; one’s own style; experiences and enjoyment of writing; revision knowledge; good grammar and spelling; and a sharpened pencil.

“Our goal at Loch Lomond Elementary School is to assist our students to accomplish all of the above, and in doing so, we feel that the NEO 2 SmartOption Mobile Lab will be an essential component in reaching our goal,” Drake said. “The lab will be our sharpened pencils, our extra pair of eyes for editing, our ‘tabula rasa.’”

Students will use the NEO 2s to write book summaries from independent reading and teacher read-alouds. After reviewing the summaries, Drake will assess comprehension and rate students’ writing skills based on a 16-point rubric.

Upon receiving a passing score of 12 points or better, students can take an Accelerated Reader quiz on their chosen book using the NEO 2 and add the summary to their personal writing portfolios.

“Our teachers are very excited to learn more about the amazing power of the NEO 2s,” Drake said of the staff’s upcoming professional development session. “What we have been able to do with them thus far is very promising.”

Loch Lomond has already incorporated the NEO 2s into one of its second-grade classes, and Drake hopes to have 80 students involved in the project by next year. “Our students come from such diverse cultures, and to be able to pull them all together with this unique project and have them share this experience together for the first time, creates a special bond between them all.”

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Judie Sage, Occupational Therapist at Arkansaw Elementary, wrote the Renaissance Learning 21st Century Writing Grant proposal in the hopes of improving writing skills and increasing student motivation at the Durand, Wisconsin school. "It was really a boost for our morale," she said, upon hearing of their award announcement. "We've had so many budget cuts that this was like seeing sunshine on a cloudy day."

As an Occupational Therapist, Sage has used AlphaSmart products for years with her students. "I particularly like the Co-Writer Applet, as this seems to really help my learning disabled students," she said.

Sage's grant proposal modeled the Carnegie Corporation's Effective Strategies for Improving Writing Skills. Seventy fourth-graders will be divided into an experimental group (using the NEO 2s) and a control group (using traditional writing strategies) to measure students' writing improvements. "An independent evaluator will analyze student writing, teaching techniques, and student engagement, collecting data approximately every seven weeks," she explained. Sage hypothesizes that using Carnegie's four specific writing strategies, along with the NEO 2s, will result in significant gains in student writing and engagement.

For the students, the opportunity to use a SmartOption Mobile Lab is priceless. "Students will be able to learn keyboarding before getting into junior high, where keyboarding is currently taught, due to previous budget cuts, and be able to work cooperatively on projects," Sage said. "For our Spanish-speaking students, it will enable them to participate more easily in class projects."

The teachers are also thankful for the additional resources. "The NEO 2s will allow our teachers greater ability to individualize writing prompts and assignments through the AlphaSmart Manager program," Sage said. "It will give students access to word-processing right in the classroom, making supervision and student progress-monitoring much easier."

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Portable NEO laptops are ideal for the Iowa School for the Deaf's environmental program

In the middle of a hectic day last May, Sue Purcell, IEP/Transition Coordinator at the Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD) in Council Bluffs, got a phone call that she never expected. A few months previously, Purcell sent in an AlphaGrant application to Renaissance Learning in the hopes of being awarded a cart of NEO laptops to implement their environmental service program.

"The announcement of being selected really took me by surprise," Purcell said. "I had mixed feelings of amazement, pride, celebration, and a wonderful sense of accomplishment." The grant award included a SmartOption Mobile Lab with 30 NEOs, along with professional development to enhance their writing curriculum.

Now one year later, Iowa School for the Deaf students—and their NEOs—have completed their second "green" project. The school's project is inspired by Roots & Shoots, an environmental endeavor founded by renowned primatologist and environmentalist Dr. Jane Goodall. Roots & Shoots serves to inform and empower young people to truly make a difference in their environment.

Using the Roots & Shoots philosophy—Knowledge, Compassion, Action—ISD's initial project, IOWATER, focused on creek and wetland conservation. "We are continuing to support and improve these microenvironments," said Kristen Newton, teacher and Roots & Shoots project coordinator. "We use the NEOs when we do chemical analysis of the water. Online data that will be sent to the state is programmed into the NEOs beforehand," she said. "Each time we go out to the wetland or pond, we take our NEOs and download the information when we return."

Newton began the second project during the second trimester. "We are now doing a feasibility study using the NEOs. We hope to turn all of our roofs 'green,'" she said. "We actually plant native plants and a butterfly garden on the flat roofs of the buildings. The plants clean the air and filter water pollutants."

Plans to add other green projects using the NEOs are now in the works. "Non-auditory technology in any form is beneficial and serves as a lifeline to our language-delayed students, providing them with a tool that serves as a communication link to a hearing world," Purcell said in her initial application. "Using NEOs for hands-on projects also motivates students to focus on their writing and organizational skills. Teachers want their students engaged, involved, and informed. If the NEO can help our students become successful in the classroom, to our teachers, the award is priceless."



NEO laptops enable Iowa School for the Deaf students to conduct in-field assignments on their IOWATER project.

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Growing Learners: Gardening Project germinates students' writing interest

Growing Learners—a community gardening project that combines hands-on learning, parental involvement, and technology—has sprouted at Summerfield Elementary in Riverview, Florida, with help from a cart of NEO laptops.

Last May, Marcy Ringdahl, Media Specialist and AlphaGrant writer, thought that winning the AlphaGrant, would be ideal for her planned learning project. "I used AlphaSmart laptops at my previous school—I loved them!" Ringdahl said. "When I became a media specialist at my new school, I could not believe that we did not have this necessity. How can you possibly teach for tomorrow when students have limited access and out-of-date technology?"

There were several motivating factors behind the Growing Learners project. "We have many students from migrant backgrounds, so teaching the value of education in the home is our primary challenge," Ringdahl said in her AlphaGrant application. "We urge parents to make education a critical factor in their children's life. This project is a grassroots effort to unify our rural farming community to a school project that involves authentic learning experiences for our students."



Ringdahl kicked off the Growing Learners project by taking the students to the University of Florida Gulf Coast Research Center to create excitement and background information for the project. Ringdahl brought along six NEOs and put them out for the students to document their learning during science lab time. After using the NEOs, the third and fourth graders were begging Ringdahl for more.

"Students are excited to work on the NEOs. I feel it liberates them from the bondage of paper and pencils, desks and chairs," Ringdahl said. "The 21st Century students are here, and they are highly motivated by interactive learning."

NEO's portability has made the most impact on her class. "Learning is dynamic and happens everywhere," she said. "The NEOs are an excellent companion for students learning 'outside the box.'"



Along with the Growing Learners project, the school utilizes the NEOs in other classes, as well. "I have a teacher that will not let the NEOs out of her sight or room—she is constantly using them for many different subjects," Ringdahl said. "She has a daily rotation in her Writer's Workshop that incorporates the Keywords program. In her Guided Reading Center, she creates quizzes to download onto the NEOs, and the students complete the task."

Ringdahl would like to see more teachers incorporate NEOs into their classrooms, and is hopeful that additional AlphaSmart professional development will further spark the teachers' interest. "It is my objective for the upcoming year to use the NEO in faculty meetings to generate interest and understanding. I honestly believe that the teachers cannot fully comprehend NEO's impact on their professional lives," she said. "It is like nothing the teachers have ever used before. If the teachers aren't comfortable with the technology, it will not be used."

With the garden in full force, students are using the NEOs to journal their gardening experiences and document growth. "Right now, students are furiously working on their writing projects," Ringdahl said. "Many are researching different gardening topics and are now quite good at typing, thanks to the Keywords program."

The NEOs have proved their worth for Ringdahl's Growing Learners project. "I think NEOs are the way to create and assess authentic writing and to provide collaboration between teacher-to-student and student-to-student," she said. "It provides a means of instruction unequal to that of any other product I know."

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To use your NEO 2s for Accelerated Reader quizzing, you need to:

1. Ensure that you are running Renaissance Place version 4.0 and Accelerated Reader version 7.5.
2. Download and install AlphaSmart Manager 2 version 3.0 from the Renaissance Learning website at <http://www.renlearn.com/neo/downloads/>
3. Use AlphaSmart Manager 2 version 3.0 to update you NEO 2s with the Accelerated Reader SmartApplet.
4. Set up your wireless receiver to communicate with your NEO 2s and with Renaissance Place.

For details, refer to Article 6964237 in the Renaissance Learning Knowledge Base

(<http://support.renlearn.com/techkb/techkb/6964237e.asp>) or consult the NEO 2 user documentation available at <http://www.renlearn.com/neo/downloads/userguides.aspx>.

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Student Writing Spotlight

Submitted by Jane Hood, Language Arts teacher, Fairhill School, Dallas, Texas

Devon is part of my seventh-grade honors literature class in a school for children with learning differences. We had studied Edgar Allan Poe and his works in the text and read, *The Man Who Would Be Poe* by Avi. The assignment was to create a mystery story around 1,000 words, or an essay comparing Poe to the main character in the novel. The story below was written by Devon in response to this assignment.

Devon is an avid reader with a charming written vocabulary! She reads constantly and has consistent retention and mature insight. She does not read quickly, but she is thorough. I have had her for both sixth- and seventh-grade honors reading classes. Sometimes her answers are so fun to grade that she gets to go to my special treat box just for her writing! She always infuses her dialogue with adverbs to let the reader know how the character is feeling, which shows depth for her age. She also has an outstanding "stick-to-it-iveness."

Being able to write on AlphaSmart laptops makes all the difference for my students. They produce quality work that is legible, well-crafted, and of substantial length!



A Sister's Betrayal

By Devon*
7th grade, Fairhill School, Dallas, Texas

"How could this day go so wrong so fast?" April White, age fifteen, asked herself. She had brown hair like her birth mom and crystal blue eyes. April's hair was pulled back into a ponytail but her bangs kept falling into her eyes.

She looked at her exhausted friend, Conner, who was trying desperately to hold up the falling roof. Conner had long blond hair in a ponytail like some rock stars do, dark blue eyes, and (lucky for them) he was muscular.

April turned her head to look at Marcy who clung to April's arm with white knuckles. Her black pigtailed were a mess now and tears streamed down her face for more than just the reason that they were trapped and Jake was passed out because of her.

April then looked down at Jake's closed brown eyes and began to think of the events of that morning.

"Come on, Jake, you promised you'd start going to school on time!" April yelled at the bottom of the stairs. "Get down here!"

"Ok! Ok! I'm coming!" Jake called.

"April, Jake don't forget your lunches." Sara White, April's adoptive mom, called from the kitchen.

" 'Kay!" April said as she grabbed her lunch and Jake's.

They headed to the school, where they met up with Rose, Marcy, and Conner.

"April, Rose, I need your help." Marcy asked.

"Sure, anything." Rose said and April nodded.

"I think someone is trying to sabotage my band," she said fear creeping into her voice, "Nicole's piano keys were smashed, Phillips drums were punctured, and my guitar strings were cut. Luckily we all have extras but..." her voice trailed off. They knew what Marcy was thinking, she was worried that her friends were going to get hurt or worse. "Come look at this."

"What's up?"

"Some weird gray plastic. Found it in the cut guitar stings." She said giving it to April.

"I'll take this to the Science lab to have a closer look at it." April said bagging it.

"It appears to be perfectly normal, but it's too flexible to be a piece of anything hard," April said frowning as she looked into the microscope.

"That's the only piece of hard evidence we've got." Rose sighed.

Suddenly, there was a Bang! The ground even shook.

"What was that?!" April yelled.

"Sounds like it came from the music room." Conner said.

"Marcy!" April and Rose yelled in unison.

Thick black smoke billowed out the doors as students came running out. They found Marcy coughing nonstop.

"Are you three ok?!" Conner asked, worry written on his face.

"Yes, I think." Rose said.

Sissy (Marcy's twin sister) came running up her, cheerleader out fit on.

"Marcy, are you ok?!" She asked her little (by a minute and a half) sister.

"April, Marcy told me you were helping her?" Sissy said, helping her sister up." We don't need your help any more. I know who did it." Sissy said.

"Then maybe you'd tell us?" April said sarcastically.

Sissy said angrily, "It was those low life friends of hers! Nicole and that Phillip guy! I knew she should have never quit the cheer squad!"

"I highly doubt that. After all their instruments were damaged even more so than your sister's." Rose said pointing this important fact out.

"They could have done it to cover their tracks!"

"Like I said, theirs are more damaged than your sister's," she said.

Sissy grabbed Marcy by the arm and started to storm off.

"I know who really did it!" April shouted. The large group that had formed now turned to April.

Sissy reeled around, her face red now as she yelled, "Then why don't you tell us?!"

"I wouldn't be in such a rush to find out, especially when it's YOU who did it, Sissy!" April said pointing an accusing finger. The crowd gasped.

"What?! Me?!" Sissy screeched.

"Yes, you. I noticed that you came from the North entrance which is closest to the music room, not by the football field where you were supposed to be. That formula you used to make smoke was also from last week's Science class."

Once more the crowd gasped, "And thanks for turning around to let me see your pom-poms. I probably wouldn't have figured it out if you hadn't. You see, earlier Rose found some gray plastic on the guitar strings you cut."

"You cut my strings?" Marcy whimpered.

"And that isn't the best part!" Jake shouted from across the room, where he had the star quarterback, Dustin, with his arm twisted behind his back. "Now tell them what you told me," Jake hissed in Dustin's ear.

"Why should I?" Dustin winced slightly. Jake squeezed on Dustin's arm.

"Me and Rick agreed to help Sissy wreck a few instruments. Sissy said she wanted another chance to beat her sister at cheerleading again."

"I got suspicious and asked Jake to ask around," April explained.

"Hey, where'd Sissy go?!" Conner asked looking around.

"There she goes!!" Rose screamed. Jake was already after her as the others followed into the language arts room. Suddenly the ground shook violently, books fell, chairs toppled over, and a piece of roof fell and hit Jake. The group ran to him while Sissy ran out. Rose chased her. Suddenly the roof fell! It would have crushed them, but Conner caught part, which is about where we started.

"I can't hold on for much longer," Conner grunted.

"I can't believe Sissy did this to me! And all because I beat her in kindergarten!" Marcy sobbed.

"Don't worry; everything's going to be fine," April said.

Jake's eyes suddenly snapped open and he said, "Need some help?"

"You know it," Conner grinned.

Not long after that Rose came with help. Jake stayed in the hospital for a few days for observation, but he was all right. Sissy got in big trouble, and they all lived happily ever after.

** Renaissance Learning never publishes minor children's last names for privacy reasons.*

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Conference Events

Name	Dates	City	State
National Educational Computing Association Conference	June 30-July 2, 2008	San Antonio	TX
National Education Association Annual Meeting	July 1-3, 2008	Washington	DC
National Conference on Differentiated Instruction	July 20-23, 2008	Las Vegas	NV

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