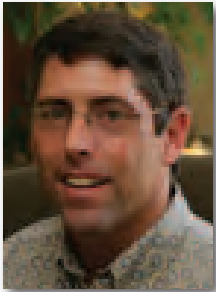
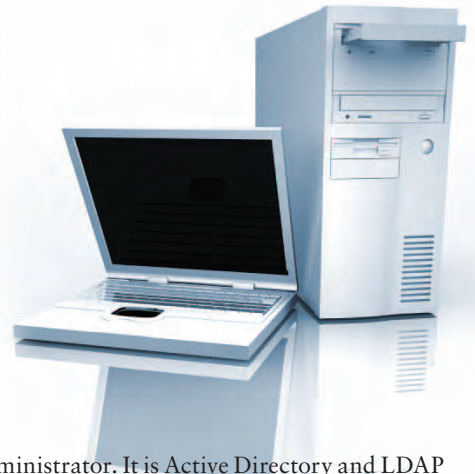


## Is It Time to Discover Open Source Desktops?



Phil Scrivano

From small, low-end tablet computers to being able to get a few more years life out of old computer hardware, the advantages are stacking up.

I have been fortunate to experience many desktop technologies in my career. As a sixth-grade teacher, I received one of the first Apple IIe computers. That same year, a student brought in an early Atari computer, which introduced the class to command line language. We soon upgraded to a couple Apple II GS computers, and we were introduced to basic networking in order to share one printer. DOS was the next step, which was followed by Windows 3.11 and the evolution of the Macintosh. Windows 95, 98a and 98b enabled us to connect the classroom to the Internet using a US Robotics 2400 baud modem. The Internet changed everything. Next were NT Workstation, Windows 2000, Mac OS X, Vista, XP, and Windows 7.

In the background during these exciting years was the software that seemed to run the Internet. Our first touch were distributions based on Unix/Linux that many of us first experienced when conducting Gopher-type searches or using a text-based e-mail system. Young computer engineers seemed to like building Unix/Linux-based servers for such things as DNS and firewalls. When I observed these types of applications in districts, the systems were primarily command line interfaces. Command line is okay, but it has been the graphical interface for common users that has made technology what it is today. Based on this observation, I believed that Unix/Linux-based systems were primarily the tools of servers and the Internet.

In 2004, I noticed my son using a graphical interface that was based on Linux. At this time, I observed him primarily still working at the command line level. I have always had an interest in the command line tools of DOS, so I started to observe and soon built a computer based on Arch Linux. This first experience at a Linux-based desktop was an exercise in command line frustration as I learned a new language. This has proved just as valuable to me as using DOS commands has been throughout the many distributions of Microsoft systems.

Today, my primary desktop is Ubuntu 9.4. Ubuntu is to Linux as Windows 3.11 was to DOS 5.0. Although there are many distributions of Linux that are excellent, Ubuntu seems to have the pulse of common society using an operating system. It is rare that the common desktop user will have a need for command line. Security can be built in by the net-

work administrator. It is Active Directory and LDAP friendly. And, it is easy to install. The business model at this time is to keep the software free and charge for support for the large-scale users who will need programming assistance. About the only thing I go back to Windows for is Apple's iTunes. In the next few months, Ubuntu will be distributing 10.4 that furthers their commitment to end-user ease of use.

Is Ubuntu ready for real time in California education? I believe the answer is "yes." Other states, such as Indiana, have been studying this question for several years. Using an open source desktop enables schools to save money in both hardware, software, and support. As more education applications become web-based, the need for high-end new stuff is decreasing. Our collective vision for technology in the classroom has always been to put a computer in the hands of every student. Technology at the hands of students will someday be considered just another tool such as a pencil.

"The program, dubbed Indiana Affordable Classroom Computer for Every Secondary Student (InACCESS), launched in 2003 as an alternative way to put computers in the hands of every student." (<http://www.schoolcio.com/ShowArticle/758>)

The models are building throughout the world. Indiana and India are good places to start looking. Do a search for "OSI," which is "Open Source in Indiana." From small, low-end tablet computers to being able to get a few more years life out of old computer hardware, the advantages are stacking up. Our customers, educators, students and administrators will adapt easily to the new distributions such as Ubuntu. The desktop is just the beginning. There are hundreds of educational software selections available now. Major applications such as Open Office, Google Chrome and Firefox are solid and ready for the school environment. There is also classroom control software such as iTALC for Intelligent Teaching and Learning with Computers that enables remote viewing and control other computers. Once you start to look at the world of open source, I believe you will see the potential benefits for your education setting. ■

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