



Buying a Document Camera

Document cameras are becoming very popular additions to the instructional arsenal in many classrooms, but what are the important features to look for when you are selecting a document camera? There are many features on most cameras and they are changing very quickly. The first generation of document cameras are video cameras on a flexible neck that display a high resolution image of what they are pointed at in real time. That is, they are live video cameras. Later generations are based on the digital camera that you might use on your vacation. They can display a live image, but they can also take a picture and store that image in the camera for a teacher to call up at any time.

The basic features of a document camera are ease of use, image resolution, portability, ability to function without a computer, and lens optics. A basic guide to these features can be found at:

http://www.documentcameraexperts.com/LearnAboutDocumentCameras/document_camera_buying_tips.aspx

Ease of Use

This is extremely important to using a document camera in the classroom. Most teachers are not real technology mavens and what something that they can learn easily and use dependably with a minimum of effort. You should look at the camera controls and see if they are simple to use. Does it have an automatic focus, or does it focus and zoom by twisting the lens? Can you turn the lens to both portrait and landscape orientations? Can you use a simple wheel to navigate through the menus or are there multiple buttons involved?

Resolution

There are basically two types of document cameras available: XGA or SVGA. You can think of these like televisions. An XGA document camera produces a higher quality image that is rectangular like a high definition television screen and the SVGA is a square image like the older televisions.

One thing that might affect your decision is that you must match your document camera to the device that will be displaying your image. If your LCD projector or monitor will only display an SVGA image, the higher quality image of an XGA camera will not matter. Finally, you may want to display your image on a television set in the classroom. If you do, then you want to be sure that your camera has a video output and not just a digital out.

Takes pictures within the camera or requires a computer

One very nice feature is the ability to take a series of pictures with your document camera and then display them in a slideshow. For example, you might want to take the images of students work as you grade them. You can then have a conversation about the assignment the next day in class. If your camera takes pictures, then all you need is your camera itself which can also store pictures. Otherwise, you would need to have your computer with you to save the pictures, or attempt to display the images live where you would be centering, focusing, and zooming the camera in front of the classroom as you teach.

Portable

This is a feature that is severely underrated in my mind. Teachers often grade their papers and do lesson planning at home. If they want to take some pictures of student work when they are grading or take some images from a book as part of their lesson planning, then they need to be able to easily move the camera from school to home and back again. Cameras come in two basic types: flexible arm or bendable gooseneck. Can you take the arm or the gooseneck and fold it so that it is easy to transport?

Image Freeze

Image freeze is an important feature to look for. It allows you freeze the image on the camera once you get an image that you are pleased with. In the classroom, students may bump desks and tables, or accidentally move the object you are displaying. The image freeze will prevent these accidents from showing up live in the classroom.

Zoom

How much and how easy is it to zoom the camera down and focus the image? While this is important, it is not as essential as a vendor might lead you to believe. A vendor is often eager to make an impressive demonstration of the camera's ability to zoom in on a small object. Most classroom images are of a worksheet, a book, or student work. These images do not require much zooming. It is a significant consideration, but not the first thing you should look for.

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