

Lone Rangers 2011



By Mark Heydon

I arrived anxious recently at the Lone Ranger Conference:

- I do not know what “small and rural and both” means, but it seems to be the core of the “Lone Ranger” apple—along with the obvious seed of one- or two-person shops.
- I do not know why Linux seems to be so attractive to Lone Rangers, a group that should be embracing the efficiency of proprietary software.
- I do not know what I was doing hanging out on a free Saturday 200 miles away from home. I had several month’s worth of reading and tweaking to do back at the shop—a sharp reminder that when it comes the tech tsunami, small shop techies surf alone, and that most of the time it seems we’re deep under the wave.

I was far from a Lone, though. Twenty-five other LRs found themselves at Minarets High School in O’Neil, Calif., just minutes away from the front entrance to Yosemite National Park. I, however, was there on a mission and I had an obvious agenda. What was I doing there?

Who are we?

Who are Lone Rangers and why do we think we’re different? Our answer is that Lone Rangers mostly work in one- or two-person shops, often with the nearest tech cohort 20 miles away. We’re the “go-to guy” for everything electrical made after 1984 and must rely on heavily-accented support lines thousands of miles away. Say, Atlanta. (“How yahawl duing tanite?”). We take consolation in that Lone Ranger shops are not bureaucratic. One vote wins office disputes. Yet, we’re special in our own minds. Hence, LR2011.

Jim Klein, Director of Information Services and Technology for the Saugus Union School District started us off. His keynote, “Life 2.0: A Vision for Education in the 21st Century,” centered us with his insights into “What’s it like to be educated in the 21st century?” Klein gave us a list of literacies that the 21st-century student will need to survive in the world:

Abundance. Students now wallow in information and opportunity. (Ironically, our CIPA filters are keeping our students from developing necessary coping skills. “Teach the kids to filter. It’s what they are going to

need to do anyway.”)

- Freedom. Freedom means liberty, software, and use. Open Source software is free. The Creative Commons is an opportunity for students to investigate learning without copyright and purchase-this-first obstacles. Information is for using, not for fighting over.
- Managing choice. Freedom and abundance come with a sense of dread. Klein noted that, if Wal-Mart with its rows and rows of merchandise intimidates us and it’s a tiny speck in our universe of choice, how will our kids cope with the near infinity of the future? Managing choice is going to be the way of life for them.
- Hyper connected. Every friend. Every day. Every minute. The right of privacy is being replaced by the right of socialization.
- Embracing Failure. The liberating nature of failure along with the educational value of failure is found in the open nature of a place where we can communicate, create and collaborate.

Twenty-first century aside, these are the raw materials of any great student. Technology puts them in their hands. LRs, we’ve got a swell job ahead of us.

Linux Is Not In A Box

As Lone Rangers, we think we’re generalists. But we’re not. We think, because we’re the only person standing, we must know a little about everything and not a lot about specialty stuff. We ask ourselves, do we need all that specialty stuff that big districts have? Don’t we often offload protection and production such as payroll on county offices and free vendors (“Free” vendors? Think Google.) and good luck and a prayer?

Andrew Schwab, IT Director at Le Grand Union High School District, and Danny Silva, Google Certified Teacher/Google Apps Certified Trainer and an agriculture teacher at Le Grand, drawing on Jim Klein’s work at Saugus, showed us how—in practice—we have created our own specialty stuff for “small and rural and both.” We need the stuff. The difference is not scale or complexity. It is our needing to specialize “small and rural and both.” Open Source solutions are a handy way of saving money while being able to tweak software to our specific needs.

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Why is Open Source so popular among Lone Rangers? Andrew and Danny answered: It's free, it's educationally oriented (doesn't have to answer to shareholders or corporate proprietary rules), and it's adaptable. We LRs like to tweak to our own logos and Andrew and Danny walked us towards the light of VMware...Citrix...FOG...BackupPC...Untangle....

What Are They Doing While We're Doing Our Stuff?

Jon Corippo, tech teacher and everything else at Minarets HS, led us to realize that, unlike many of our brethren of Colossus Unified, LRs are down, dirty and so close to our students that we can feel their heartbeats.

He also reminded us that the Internet is evolving in our favor. Internet users are looking for personal discovery, learning, communication and growth. Not coincidentally: a) the tools of education are available and multiplying; b) much of the training of our students is taken care of by their own curiosity; and c) our responsibility is to facilitate this awakening.

Of course, be warned: Jon is obsessed. And through a technical cornucopia of web-based tools, he showed us how the tools could be used and how to get those tools into the classroom. "Get in their [teachers'] lives, not their faces." Show up. Bring them into your tech meetings. Attend their meetings. Offer shows of what is available and how to use it. Offer to set up what is available. Use opportunities for showing instruction. The "Lone" in LRs may be fine for the tech side, but "Arranger" should be on the side of academics. (Okay, he didn't say that, but it fits.)

Martha The Magnificent

There was one great hero of the conference: Martha Robrahn. It was Martha who brought us all together, who invited us unwashed and needy into her school, who arranged a great lunch and great speakers and even arranged our chairs (circular) so that we could not just meet but talk and exchange thoughts.

And, it was Martha who gave the most technical of the presentations in her discussion of WiFi choices for small schools.

She reminded us that our lives can be as complex as a high grade jigsaw puzzle if we choose, but we need to keep a practical perspective. The choice of a WiFi system is a mishmash of assessing need, research, choice, application and adjustment, but most often the needs of small, rural schools are unique given distance. (It's not unusual for a small school district to stretch over 20 or 30 miles of rolling hills, water, and luddite cattle and arrive at a building designed without practical consideration of the 21st century), lack of resources (superintendents who think Blackberries grow on bushes), or consultants whose engineers seemed trained in hotel management. It was a refreshing reminder that we don't need gadgets built for Lockheed. We seek gadgets that are built for us.

Which, in a way...

So, LRs are not plug and play. We listen and adapt. Invent and adjust. Create and find. We're, "Hand us the duct tape, Charlie—we're going in!"

Which, in a way, was the theme of the conference. We're here. We're small. We're proud. We know what we have to do. There wasn't much intensive tech talk. No heavy duty talk about wires or packets or Form 470s. This was a conference centered entirely on small and rural and both, on students and technology and us. It was a conference that was, of course, totally cool (I woke up Saturday morning to snow outside my hotel window), and I knew why I was there. ■

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Resources:

Jim Klein's Blog: <http://community.saugusd.org/jklein/weblog/>

Andrew Schwab and Danny Silva: <https://sites.google.com/a/smallschoolbigtech.com/www/>

Jon Corippo's Presentations: <http://www.slideshare.net/jcorippo>

Martha Robrahn and Minarets HS: <http://minaretsmustangs.wikispaces.com/>