



# Apple Technologies Give Students the Freedom to Succeed

Mountain View, CA—Visitors to Gordon Jack’s classroom immediately sense that something very different is going on. For starters, there’s the room’s bubblegum-pink door. Another clue: his English students are busily sorting through photo files to create their self-portraits. But at the aptly named Freestyle Academy, such activities are the norm. Supported by a full complement of Apple technologies—as well as equipment and furnishings made possible by several other Silicon Valley leaders—Freestyle is giving students the promise of a very rosy future.

Freestyle Academy of Communication Arts and Technology (ACAAT)—better known as Freestyle Academy—officially opened its doors in September of 2006. But several years of planning, community outreach, and just plain luck went into the creation of the school. Credit goes to Rich Fischer, former superintendent of the Mountain View-Los Altos (MVLA) Union High School District, for sensing that students who struggled with the traditional classroom model might find more fulfillment through a curriculum that integrated leading-edge technology tools.

“My vision was to create an alternative high school that appealed to the many kids who were just ‘doing school,’ and not really finding anything that flamed their own passions,” Fischer says. “I had been very active in the local Chambers of Commerce, and began exploring with business leaders what they believed the kids of the future would need. Over and over, the idea of a school that stressed multimedia kept coming up.”

## The Industry’s Verdict: Buy the Mac

As president of the Mountain View Chamber, Fischer had the chance to rub elbows with many technology industry luminaries, including executives from Google, Adobe, Netscape, and other companies. With their counsel—and funding from the City of Mountain View—Fischer was able to put together the plan for Freestyle. At the same time, he enlisted Jack (a MVLA faculty member) to recruit students and additional community support, and help develop the technology-infused curriculum. That’s when MVLA—previously an all-PC district—began to consider the purchase of Macintosh computers.

Says Jack, “We formed an advisory council with the technology companies in our area because they had the industry expertise we could take advantage of, and we wanted to make sure our students would be working to industry standards. In addition to asking for funding and grants, we aimed to connect our program to the community, and really prepare our students for the 21st-century workforce.



## Objectives

- Provide alternative to traditional classroom model
- Engage struggling students through multimedia technologies
- Equip students with industry-standard digital literacy skills

## Solution

- 50+ iMac, Power Mac, and Apple notebook computers
- 1 Xserve
- Final Cut Studio, iLife digital authoring suite

## Results

- Students are highly motivated by use of technology tools
- Integrated, project-based curriculum ideally supports students with learning differences
- Students are acquiring 21st-century technical expertise

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Gordon Jack, English Teacher, Freestyle Academy of Communication Arts and Technology

"Despite the fact that we were a PC district," Jack continues, "buying the Mac computers wasn't as hard of a sell as we thought it might be. When you talk about industry standards for graphics and design and the web, you simply have to have the Mac. So we have them; we love them and they're great."

### **Apple Tools Support Self-Expression**

Students now attend their traditional, comprehensive MVLA school in the morning to study science, mathematics, and history, then go to Freestyle for afternoon classes in English, fine arts, and their elective courses. At Freestyle their interrelated, project-based curriculum is highly personalized and self-directed. For example, Jack's English students complete five projects throughout the school year, each of which explores a different theme: "How do I know my values are my own?" "Where do I see my values reflected in society?" and "How can I use unconventional forms to express myself?"

The exploration of each theme is carried over into students' other classes, which utilize a full range of media such as essays, public service announcements (PSAs), blogs, graphic novels, films, and podcasts. Students are free to choose the format for their projects that best leverages their creativity and self-expression. With a full complement of Apple hardware and software tools at their disposal, such choices are rich and stimulating.

### **Mac Ideal for Visual Learners**

Jack believes that the ability of the Mac and applications such as the iLife suite to support visual learners is critical to the success of Freestyle Academy. Instead of adhering to the time-honored route of reading, writing, and repetition, he says students can leverage the rich multimedia capabilities of their Apple tools as an alternate path to academic achievement.

"When we do a good job of really integrating the projects—like the photo narratives, in which students write their short stories from their photos—their writing is so much better," notes Jack. "They're very engaged by the visual images, and then when they sit down at the computer to write their stories, they've already done the mental work ahead of time. Since writing is so abstract, many of our students have more success by starting with something that's more concrete, like a picture."

### **Students Say Learning Is Fun**

As the last of Jack's students' heads out the (pink) door for the evening, he's already eagerly anticipating what the next day's activities will bring. Sure, Freestyle's students are acquiring critical collaboration, technological literacy, and visual literacy skills. But with exciting Apple technologies at their fingertips, they're also acquiring something far more important: a passion for learning.

"Anecdotally, we have a ton of evidence saying this program is really engaging kids, and they're responding well," Jack says. "When students tell you they're now getting the best grades ever, and that they're more motivated to learn than ever, that's pretty amazing."

**"There was no way we could operate a viable multimedia academy without a significant Apple presence. Now we have it, and it is exceeding everyone's expectations!"**

Rich Fischer, Former Superintendent,  
Mountain View-Los Altos Union High  
School District

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