Computer tools are a combination of software and hardware used to complete task efficiently and which also allows the user (teacher or student) to increase the quality of their performance and/or their results. The “tools approach” as discussed in Grabe and Grabe, takes the focus off the computer and speaks to not pigeonholing technology, but instead using tools in creative ways to encourage active learning in directions other than the tools original intent.

The teacher acts more like a facilitator than “master and commander” of the information because students are more actively involved in their own learning. With the tools approach, knowledge and skills are not a “gimme” handed out by the teacher. The student themselves construct their own skills by the learning that takes place as they receive information and learn new tasks.

As a facilitator, the teacher promotes more mental work on the part of the student. Teachers can assign challenging tasks and students should gather the information themselves to solve the problem presented. Teachers should be available to ask questions to promote additional thinking and learning and also as a resource that the student can go to if they need further direction. It is important for the teacher to motivate students and build their confidence while they are involved in learning. The teacher must make the student feel capable, involve them in meaningful activities and be able to show the learner “what’s in it for them”. The learner should be able to demonstrate any new tasks learned and as time goes on they should become multi-disciplined.

This differs to other approaches to educational computing in that other learning is usually organized into “tidy bundles” of information directly presented to the students as rote.

Designers have to be able to actively engage the student in order for discovery learning to take place. Developers need to work with designers and teachers to build learning activities that result in the intended behaviors. In collaborating with teachers and designers, developers can also grab more of a foothold in the market by developing a “one size fits all” tool. Administrators are more apt to buy a tool that mimics the flexibility of the “tools approach”; one that could be used for multi purposes.

As budgets are forever a point of concern for our company, we try to do more with less. We not only use the computer software to teach how to perform certain tasks through drill and practice, presentation style and self-paced tutorials, but we also use the computer to teach how to use the computer and the software through simulations. The cost savings have been incredible when you consider how much it would cost us to send each student out to a course or seminar. Add to that the time away from the office, and related travel costs.

Word processing is a tool that the trainers and I utilize very frequently to create technical manuals, paper-based assessments, proposals, storyboards, case studies, and evaluations. We also use this tool to create icebreaker “recipe
cards”. Before each of our regularly scheduled meetings, one trainer is responsible for an appropriate icebreaker based on the agenda items. They will use the program to prepare the cards for each of the other trainers to place in their “recipe box” for future use. This allows them to build a library of icebreakers by category for their classroom training and other meetings. In addition, we use word processing (contrary to its name) to make colorful clipart cutouts and tables for our bulletin boards.

We also utilize the second tool Grabe and Grabe mentions, the spreadsheet. We use the spreadsheet as a way to track internal patron usage and the borrowing of material from our business library. We also use to create and monitor the department budget, associate turnover, staffing projections, and calculate ROI for the department. We have T3 (train-the-trainer) sessions so that new trainers can learn to use the software for these purposes.

The last of the tools mentioned, the database we use to collect and track test scores, keep record of course offerings, schedules, and availability of resources (i.e. rooms, hardware, library material, documents, supplies, etc.) Trainers are also taught in T3 sessions how and when to use this tool.