

May Community Center Computer Class

Technology That Could Help Us Remain Independent

What technology would make it possible for you to remain independent for five or ten years longer?

“Suppose technology meant you could stay in your own home until 90 instead of having to leave at 80. Would that change how you feel about it?”

Three Things

- A home that watches out for you — notices activity and possible trouble.
- A robot that physically helps you — lifts, carries, reaches, and handles objects.
- Technology you wear — assists with reading, communication, and finding your way.

The first two topics connect directly: noticing a problem is useful, but doing something about it requires physical help. Glasses are related to independence but the assistance travels with you.

The underlying tradeoffs

Independence is the potential benefit. Privacy, trust, cost, reliability, and control are the practical questions. Which tradeoffs matter to you?

1. A Home That Watches Out for You

“Suppose you are 82, living alone, and want to stay in your own house. Your children worry about you. What if the house itself could notice when something might be wrong?”

This does not necessarily require cameras everywhere. Motion sensors, door sensors, and other devices can report activity without sending pictures. Different products provide different features; no single system necessarily does all of the following.

Examples:

- You normally get out of bed by 8:00. Today it is 10:30 and there has been no activity.
- You entered the bathroom but have not come out for an unusually long time.
- The refrigerator has not been opened, or there has been no kitchen activity all day.
- An exterior door was left open, or the stove may still be on.
- A device detects what appears to be a fall.
- Your usual pattern of activity changes suddenly.

What makes the technology interesting

Some systems can learn a person's normal routine and flag changes. A change in activity might deserve a check-in, but it is not proof of illness or an emergency.

Monitoring does not necessarily mean somebody is watching you. A sensor might report "No movement detected in the kitchen today" without showing a picture of you making a sandwich.

The better the system knows your routine, the more information it has about your private life. Even camera-free sensors can reveal personal habits.

Questions:

- Would you allow this if it helped you remain in your home longer?
- Would you accept motion sensors? A bathroom sensor? A living-room camera?
- Would your answer change if software analyzed the camera and family received only an alert?
- Who should receive alerts, and who would actually respond?

Practical problem: an alert does not provide help by itself. False alarms, missed events, power or internet outages, and an unavailable responder can limit the benefit.

2. A Robot That Physically Helps You

Connect it to the monitored house

"The house knows you dropped something on the floor. That is useful—but it cannot pick it up. What if a robot could?"

Humanoid robots are being developed for physical work, including industrial settings. A factory demonstration does not establish that a robot is ready to work safely and reliably in somebody's home. Treat the household examples below as possibilities, not a shopping list of proven capabilities.

Why make a robot human-shaped

Our homes were designed around human bodies. Doors, cabinets, stairs, shelves, switches, appliances, and tools assume that someone can reach, grasp, and move through the space. A human-shaped robot could potentially use that environment without rebuilding the house. Other robot designs may also be useful.

Everyday jobs that could matter

- "Bring me my glasses."
- "Take the clothes out of the dryer."
- "Bring that heavy package inside."
- Carry groceries, reach a shelf, pick up dropped objects, or take out the trash.

The most useful feature might be strength and mobility rather than companionship. Lifting, carrying, bending, and reaching can become difficult even when someone can still manage the rest of daily life.

“I fell. Help me.” is a powerful future scenario, but lifting a person safely is far more demanding than carrying a box. Do not assume that an ordinary household robot could provide safe lifting or emergency care.

Questions:

- What is the first job you would give a robot?
- Would you want one moving around your house?
- Would you trust it enough to be alone with you?
- Would you prefer a human helper for part of the day or a reliable robot available around the clock? Why?
- Which jobs should always require a person?

Practical problems:

Cost, maintenance, charging, clutter, pets, stairs, and unexpected situations all matter. A home is less predictable than a factory. Ask who would stop or repair the robot if it made a mistake, and whether the owner could easily turn it off.

The point for discussion: if physical chores were the main obstacle to staying home, would dependable robotic help change your decision?

3. Technology You Wear

Start with the smartphone

“We have spent years carrying a computer in our pocket. What if we could get useful help without taking it out?”

Smart glasses can combine cameras, microphones, speakers, and AI. Some models have a display; others provide spoken assistance without showing anything on the lenses. Features vary, so wearing smart glasses does not automatically mean having all of these abilities.

Concrete possibilities

- Reading — “Read this restaurant menu to me.”
- Recognition — “What kind of plant is that?”
- Directions — spoken guidance, or directions in the field of view on suitable display models.
- Translation — help understanding someone speaking another language.
- Understanding objects — “What does this button do?”

- Memory assistance — a future or product-dependent feature might help locate keys if the system previously recorded where they were placed.

Reading a prescription label is an understandable example of the benefit. But a misread word or number could matter: confirm medication instructions with the original label or a pharmacist rather than relying on AI alone.

What could make glasses useful

Assistance could travel with you rather than staying in the house. Reading small print, understanding information, or finding your way may become easier. Comfort, prescription-lens compatibility, hearing, battery life, and ease of use could determine whether someone actually wears them.

Questions:

- Would you wear AI glasses if they were useful? Which feature would persuade you?
- How would you feel if everybody else were wearing them?
- Where should recording be restricted or require permission?
- Would you trust a translation or an AI description? How would you check it?

A camera and microphone raise privacy questions for both the wearer and the people nearby. Smart glasses are not necessarily recording continuously, but students should ask what is captured, stored, or shared.

Bring the three topics back together

“Which would help you most:

- a house that notices trouble,
- a robot that handles physical chores, or
- glasses that assist wherever you go?”

“What would you be willing to give up in exchange for more independence—some privacy, some control, money, or having technology around you all the time?”

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