

Chapter 17

Apps as Assistive Technology

Emily C. Bouck

Michigan State University, USA

Sara M. Flanagan

University of Kentucky, USA

Missy D. Cosby

Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Apps can serve as assistive technology to support students with disabilities. Yet, there is little support for educators in determining the most effective and efficient apps to support students with disabilities. The objectives of this chapter include (1) examining how apps can serve as assistive technology for students with disabilities; (2) discussing the importance of educators not being arbitrary in their decision to select and implement apps to serve as assistive technology, such as relying on reviews, ratings, app lists, app databases, or the inclusion on a categorization on iTunes or Google Play; and (3) presenting options for educators evaluating apps, which can assist educators in making more informed decisions for apps as assistive technology. Although some app evaluation rubrics exist specifically for students with disabilities, there is little research as to the impact of the rubrics on educators selecting apps or the impact on student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers and students are increasingly using mobile devices in and out of school for education and entertainment (Molnar, 2015; Nagel, 2014; Rodríguez, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2014). And along with the use of mobile technologies comes apps. Apps can support instruction for all students as well as specifically students with disabilities (Rodríguez et al., 2014; Stephenson & Limbrick, 2013). Apps can serve as assistive technology to support students with disabilities in a variety of ways, including in such areas as academics, organization, access, daily living, and communication (Bouck, 2016). The objectives of this article include:

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1. Examining how apps can serve as assistive technology for students with disabilities,
2. Discussing the importance of educators not being arbitrary in their decision to select and implement apps to serve as assistive technology, such as relying on reviews, ratings, app lists, app databases, or the inclusion on a categorization on iTunes or Google Play; and
3. Presenting options for educators evaluating apps, which can assist educators in making more informed decisions for apps as assistive technology.

BACKGROUND

Mobile applications, or “apps” as they are more commonly known, are software programs specifically designed to operate on mobile devices such as tablets and smartphones; apps extend the basic capabilities of a device (Purcell, Entner, & Henderson, 2010). Apps are available pre-installed on a mobile device or are available to download through the Apple iTunes App store, Amazon Appstore, Google Play (formerly, Android Market), and Windows Store. Apps, like more traditional computer software, serve a variety of purposes for productivity (e.g., email, word processing), lifestyle (e.g., travel, fitness), gaming, entertainment (e.g., photos), social networking, education (e.g., basic math facts), and general educational topics (e.g., reference apps).

As apps and mobile devices continue to be a mainstay of daily lives, they are increasingly integrated into education. The majority of K-12 students has access to a some type of mobile device at home and/or school (Grunwald Associates LLC, 2013; Nagel, 2014). The commonly heard phrase, “there’s an app for that,” references that an app exists for any purpose imaginable in education – let alone individual’s daily lives – from learning to write the letter A to experimenting with chemical reactions. Of all of the available apps in iTunes, an estimated 80,000 are targeted specifically to K-12 education (Apple, 2015).

While the exact number of schools with specific 1:1 mobile device program or consistent access to mobile devices is unknown, it is estimated that almost half of all K-12 students have 1:1 computing or access to a device for regular use. In 2012, this number was only 23% (Molnar, 2015). While research is limited on the benefits of apps on mobile devices in education due to the newness and ever-changing nature of technology, apps can provide benefits for all students (Cayton-Hodges, Feng, & Pan, 2015; Mehdipour & Zerehkafi, 2013).

Beyond their use by teachers and for students in general, apps can serve as assistive technology. The term assistive technology refers to both assistive technology devices as well as assistive technology services; for the purposes of this article we will be considering assistive technology as assistive technology devices. An assistive device, as first defined in the Technology-Related Assistance for Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1988 (referred to as the Tech-Act; Public Law [PL] 100-40) is, “...any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities (29 U.S.C. Sec 2202(2)).” In other words, an assistive technology device is *anything* that supports students with disability. Examples of assistive technology devices include hearing aids, braille, text-to-speech, augmentative and alternative communication devices, wheelchairs, and switches.

Given the ambiguous and seemingly all-encompassing definition of an assistive technology device, assistive technologies are often categorized by level of technology as well as purpose. While a few different purpose categorization schemes exist, a common system is the one proposed by the Wisconsin

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