

Software Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

Evaluating software is an important component in the process of choosing technology for learning and instruction. The saying goes that you can not read a book by its cover but that is not necessarily true for software. In fact the first thing to understand about a possible software solution has nothing to do with the software. Whether it is for student learning or district management, the key to finding the right software is to know exactly why it is needed and how it is going to be used. For example, selecting software for kindergarten students to learn their numbers requires an understanding of how 5-year old children process information, physically manipulate computer keyboards and a mouse, and understanding how they will use it in class. A teacher should know if students will work independently or in groups and how long will they have to work during any one session. Will their work be saved? If students will work cooperatively, software should be chosen that is designed to engage all the students sitting around the computer. These are a few considerations that teachers should use when they initially review software. There are several others listed later in this article and guidelines listed in the references.

There is one basic rule for software selection that helps people make a fairly quick decision about the purchase. It is now commonly used and referred to as the 15-minute rule. It basically means if a person cannot understand software in the first 15 minutes of using it, then give it no more precious time and move on to another company or title. Not only should the software be intuitive but also the installation should be easy and quick. If it is network software do not forget to involve district technicians in the assessment. They can help with questions concerning software versions, computer compatibility, and network accessibility. And the technicians will really appreciate being involved and proactive. The short version of a software assessment is to use the 15-minute rule, know who will use it and why, think of student learning styles and needs, and ask the technicians for help with compatibility.

Remember that technicians are not teachers. They are not qualified to select student software, although this often happens. The rest of this article identifies the process for software purchases, Internet software and programs, checklists for easy 1-2-3 evaluations, and hardware needs.

A simple search on Google provides over 343,000,000 hits for software reviews and selection processes. There are an abundance of checklists, processes, and review strategies on the Internet via articles, books, and journals. The problem is that teachers don't have the time! Teaching and administration in schools requires a lot of time and thought. The question is where we find the time to review software too! Often one or two teachers review software products, but if these results are not shared it may come at a price. This is one case where the more buy in by the whole grade level and the more solutions this software will offer students the better it will serve educational needs and the more equitably it will be used throughout the grade level. Software should impact the curriculum and be a part of its delivery. There should not be options to "not" use it; therefore the more buy in, the better. The same is true for management software. Understanding why it is needed, how it is to be used, and eliciting the input of the end users increases potential success. This will give the district better value for funding resources and increased integration of technology into the curriculum; always a good thing for students. Here are some quick and easy guidelines to use for the selection process:

- Make it a curricula decision and not just a software decision.
- Involve as many people as possible, especially the curriculum and technology directors or supervisor, teachers, students, and the technician.
- Specifically identify the outcomes for the software. Know exactly what skills or concepts the student should experience or what management procedures that need to be improved or automated.
- Have consensus on these outcomes prior to pre-viewing and purchase. It is always a good idea to

put it in the hands of students first and get their reaction!

- Budget for upgrades and write it into the curriculum for ongoing use and review throughout the upcoming years.
- Collect data to determine success and future plan of actions.
- Do not write the title of software into an individual education plan (IEP). Write in the skill set and objective of the technology. This will help manage these needs as the student progresses through grade levels and schools.

A final note about the process is to restate the obvious; educators do not have a lot of time to do this. It is a reality of education. However, if the software truly impacts student-learning, teachers will make the time. Still, keep the discussion meetings short and to the point. Many times a meeting is not needed. Just load the trial software on the computers and let teachers and students play with it for a month. Collect the “checklists” identifying key uses and concepts and talk with the participants at the end of the month and the decision will be made.

There are very lengthy checklists for software selection and this is another time grabber. A good assessment needs a good review but there will not be many responses if it takes a lot of time to fill the survey out. So make it brief. Below are five simple questions for the student and the teacher. Remember when the software was identified the need and title were decided as well as collaboration, the use of data, and compatibility issues with district hardware.

Student Review:

- Was it easy to use?
- Did it keep your attention?
- Was it challenging?
- Would you like to use it again?
- Did it help you learn something?

Teacher Review:

- Was the student engaged?
- Did the software provide student results and were they easy to access?
- Did the use of the software integrate with the curriculum lesson?
- Can the software be managed in the classroom? (Do the students need the teacher’s help?)

- What is the student goal? (To provide consistency and collect reliable data this needs to be identified and planned to synchronize with lessons.)

Students and teachers can use a Likert scale for their assessment. Depending on the grade level the scale can be numbers, words, or even smiley faces. The important thing is to complete an assessment easily and in a timely fashion.

There is much to be said for being proactive and giving staff time to use and reflect on software applications. But the world of education is not perfect and reality suggests that sometimes we need to make decisions very quickly. But good decisions can still be made and stakeholders can still be involved in the process. When decisions have to be made within a short time frame, use the following strategies to complete the review. Locate existing reviews on the Internet and give them to staff to aid in their review. Contact other schools for their evaluations. Gather staff into one review sitting and have them work together. Gather students into one review sitting during recess and have them work together. Participate in a Webinar where the software will be modeled and demonstrated by an expert.

It is important to resist the pressure of time and cut back on the review process. If time really is of the essence, determine how to proceed while protecting taxpayer’s money and the educational experience for students. Planning within realistic expectations and time frames will enable better investments and software selection.

Teachers should be encouraged to use software to help them and their students. Many teachers say that they would not know how to do this or even know what to look for. As a result their students do not interact with technology. But every teacher has the skill set and intelligence to do this. What confuses some teachers is the technology lingo and advertisements. It is hard to read a Web page or catalog when one does not know what to look for. It takes some understanding to adjust our reading habits to the diversity of today’s advertisement. Reading the fine print is necessary and will often help to make that quick decision of whether the product will meet the standards of the district. Here are a few tips: (1) know what kind of computer is used (PC or MAC), (2) what is the computer operating system (OS), does it have DVD or CD, and Internet/Network access. Remember the technician can help with this information and should be involved at this point. (See Table 1).

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