

Educational Software



What is Educational Software?

Educational software refers to software that can be used by teachers and students to support teaching and learning. Educational software is essential in any learning environment to allow teachers and students maximise the power of the computer. There are hundreds of educational software titles available on the market but not all are suitable for use in schools.

This vast collection of educational software can be divided into two categories:

- **Content-free software**
- **Content-rich software**

Each of these categories is briefly explained below with suggestions as to how teachers can make more informed decisions when selecting educational software in the future.

Content-free Software

Content-free software is the more flexible of the two categories as it provides teachers and students with the tools to create their own content. It tends to be dominated by open-ended software products that support the creativity of the user, such as word processing and graphics programs.

For example, if a teacher is selecting a program to support the creative writing process within the school, they should select a word processing program that meets the needs of their students. Junior primary students may require a word processing program that contains limited menu options, while also supporting a variety of graphic, font and sound file formats. Senior students may require a word processing program that follows business conventions while students with special needs may require a word processing program that includes auditory feedback in order for them to monitor their work. The school should decide the most appropriate program based on the students' needs and the school's budget.

The following table lists a series of tasks and in each case suggests one type of content-free software program that could accomplish the task effectively.

Task	Suggested Software Type
Writing	Word processing or desktop publishing program (e.g., Word or Textease)
Writing a musical score	Score arranging software (e.g., Sibelius)
Editing a digital photograph	Image editing software (e.g., Paint Shop Pro)
Brainstorming, essay planning	Concept mapping software (e.g., Inspiration)

Irish teachers have been using content-free software for a long time, as it facilitates a wide range of cross-curricular teaching and learning activities. Content Free software also offers better opportunities for the sharing and collaboration of reusable resources.

Content-rich Software

Content-rich software accounts for a large proportion of commercially-produced educational software. It typically comprises multimedia content (e.g., graphics, video, sound, animation, etc.), which is presented in a very structured way. There is a wide range of content-rich software available on the market ranging from teaching basic number concepts to explaining complex mathematical equations. In a school setting, this type of software is used by teachers to teach topics and by students seeking to gain a deeper understanding of a particular topic.

Unlike content-free software the user rarely can input their own material, as these programs tend to restrict the level of user control. Furthermore, a large proportion of the content-rich software currently available is tutorial or drill and practice. For example, if a student is having difficulty mastering basic number concepts the teacher may decide to introduce a drill and practice Maths program. Apart from presenting the material in an alternative format, this provides the student with a safe, friendly environment in which they can practice their skills. Content-rich software is extremely useful and should be carefully selected to support aspects of the school curriculum. It is usual that the content contained within content-rich software is copyright protected so one may be breaking the law if one uses it in a context outside of the software. The licence agreement (also known as EULA-*End User Licence Agreement*) will inform you of your rights and responsibilities. The following table outlines some tasks that can be supported by this type of software.

Task	Suggested Software Type
Reinforce basic number concepts	Drill and practice Maths program (e.g., Millie's Math House)
Explore electrical concepts	Science simulation program (e.g., Exploring Science)
Information retrieval	Multimedia encyclopaedia (e.g., Encarta)

Selecting Appropriate Software

The NCTE does not produce approved lists of educational software. It believes that teachers themselves are best positioned to choose software that meets the needs of their teaching and learning situations. However, in order to assist teachers in selecting appropriate software, the NCTE has published a booklet entitled *Evaluating Educational Software: A Teacher's Guide* and this is available to all teachers. In addition, evaluations of software generated by classroom teachers are published on NCTE's Software Central Web site (<http://www.softwarecentral.ie>). Here individual teachers describe how they used particular software titles in their classrooms.

Tips

- View other teachers' evaluations on NCTE's Software Central Web site.
- If you are unfamiliar with a software program, contact your software supplier and ask if they allow unsuitable programs to be returned.
- Check if subject associations or educational bodies are using the software

Purchasing Considerations

When a school purchases software, it is by default also purchasing a licence to use the software. However, it is important that the most *appropriate* licence is purchased. This will be determined by the intended use of the software in the school. Refer to Advice Sheet 22 for more detailed information on software licences.

The issues of technical support and availability of upgrades are important factors to consider when deciding on particular educational software programs.

- Can program upgrades be purchased at a reduced cost?
- Do the software developers provide technical support for their product?
- Are there any websites or resources that support teachers in using the software?

Relevant Web Sites

Software Central

www.softwarecentral.ie

Finding software that fits with curriculum requirements is a major challenge facing teachers seeking to use ICT in their teaching. Software Central website, provides advice and support to teachers on the use of software in their classrooms.

Becta

http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=re&catcode=ss_res_dig_02

Becta is a British agency which provides advice and support to the educational sector in the UK. The link refers to its resources on digital resources which includes Educational Software.

TEEM

www.teem.org.uk

TEEM is a British educational organisation which supplies evaluations by teachers of educational software and curriculum content. The website is organised by Subject and British Key Stage levels

Superkids Educational Software Review

www.superkids.com

Superkids is an US website that has a long pedigree in reviewing software and other ICT related issues. Educational software is only a part of the website's content.

Schoolzone

www.schoolzone.co.uk

Schoolzone is an independent UK review site initially set up by UK teachers and parents. It has expanded its role and expertise into other educational related areas.

Note: While the advice sheets aim to act as a guide, the inclusion of any products and company names does not imply approval by the NCTE, nor does the exclusion imply the reverse. The NCTE does not accept responsibility for any opinions, advice or recommendations on external web sites linked to the NCTE site.

This Advice Sheet and other relevant information are available at:

www.ncte.ie/ICTAdviceSupport/AdviceSheets