



Ten Questions To Ask Before Purchasing Interactive Digital Content

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2012

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An Educator's Guide



According to research, students whose teachers use technology effectively in the classroom have higher test scores than students whose teachers do not.

So schools purchase projectors, interactive whiteboards, response systems, computers, and tablets with the goal of using technology to reach 21st century learners and engage students.

But as schools begin implementations, administrators discover that simply *placing hardware in classrooms does not raise student achievement*. Teachers need help *using* this technology effectively. And the primary assistance teachers need to use technology effectively is access to high quality digital content.

Unfortunately, most schools approach digital content as an unnecessary “extra” after they have spent tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars on technology hardware. Most sales representatives and hardware manufacturers only promote that teachers create or find their own content.

This is equivalent to providing teachers with a DVD player but refusing to buy them DVDs and instead asking them to create their own DVDs or to search the internet for free downloads. Seems like a stretch, but for some teachers, the task of finding or creating their own content is as difficult as creating your own DVD.

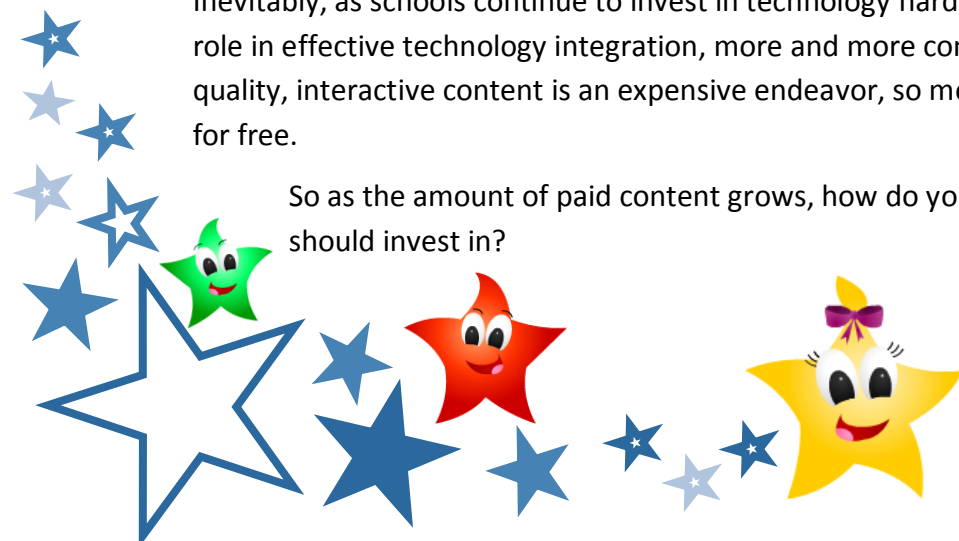
“Free content” is not a viable long-term solution.

SMART Exchange, Promethean Planet, mimio Connect and the eInstruction community are great places to start searching for content to teach effectively with interactive technologies; however, content on these sites can be difficult to sift through and questionable in quality. Teachers will need resources in addition to the user generated content available in these libraries. In fact, 88% of educators said they would use IWBs, or would use their existing IWBs more often, if more digital content were available according to the “K-12 Technology Tools and Trends 2009” report produced by Simba Information and Market Data Retrieval (MDR).

Similarly, laptops and tablets can be effective tools for individualized instruction, but the hardware is only as useful as the content it presents. Teachers can spend hours online searching for free interactive content and apps (a majority of which are supported by obtrusive advertising) when search time could be better spent planning effective lessons utilizing the content.

Inevitably, as schools continue to invest in technology hardware and begin to realize digital content’s role in effective technology integration, more and more companies will be offering content. Creating quality, interactive content is an expensive endeavor, so most of these resources will not be provided for free.

So as the amount of paid content grows, how do you know what interactive digital content you should invest in?



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Here are ten questions you should ask before purchasing interactive digital content in all its forms from interactive whiteboard packages to individualized software programs.

Question #1: Are these resources already available in my interactive technology software or online?

This may seem like an unnecessary question, but there is content currently available for purchase that includes spinners, dice, currency, flash cards, and a host of other activities and manipulatives that are already located in interactive technology software galleries. Most interactive technology software galleries are quite extensive. Take a few minutes to browse through the options available in the software you currently have before investing in outside resources.

NLVM, Shodor, and Illuminations provide many free online and downloadable interactive manipulatives. Yet some paid content still includes base ten blocks, arrow cards, rulers, clocks, fraction bars and pattern blocks—all tools that can be freely accessed online. If you were to remove these manipulatives from an interactive content package, how much content is left?

Familiarize yourself with the content available on free educational sites to be sure you are not paying for an activity that has a similar version available online for free. (Note: It is important to differentiate between free content that is ad supported and free content that does not show ads. Sometimes it is of value to pay for content that duplicates activities available online if the free content online is surrounded by advertisements.) In addition, ask if comparable free versions are easily located. There is free digital content on the web, but if teachers are spending hours searching for it, the district has spent more money in lost productivity than they have gained by using free content.

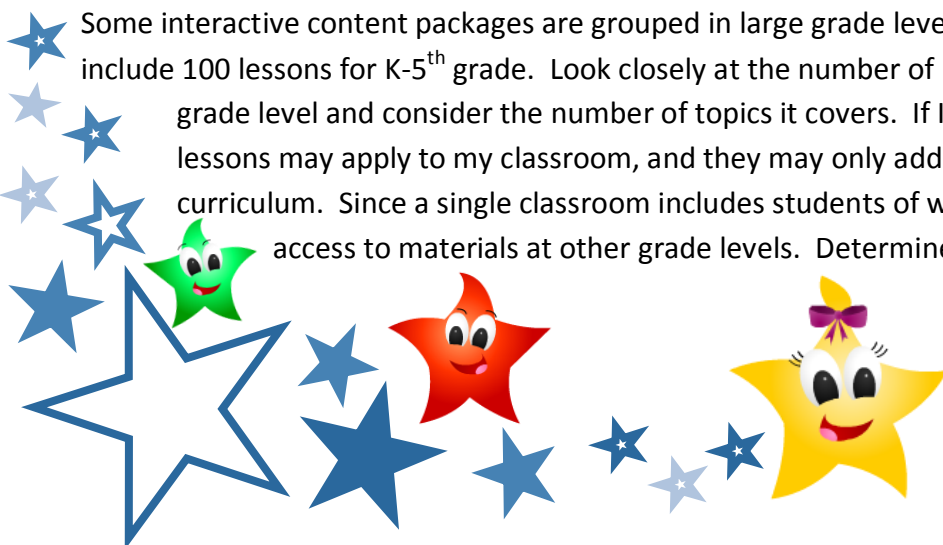
Question #2: Are these resources like a textbook online? Could I create these resources myself?

If content looks like it is a scanned .pdf from your textbook, is similar to a Power Point slide with some simple text and images, offers no functionality beyond drag and drop, or looks like something you could create in your interactive technology software, you can save your money and most likely find comparable content free on any interactive whiteboard community site.

Question #3: Are these resources limited in number or comprehensive?

Some interactive content packages are grouped in large grade level bands. For example, a math pack may include 100 lessons for K-5th grade. Look closely at the number of lessons that pack includes for each specific grade level and consider the number of topics it covers. If I am a first grade teacher, only 20 of those lessons may apply to my classroom, and they may only address 6 of the 15 math topics taught in my curriculum. Since a single classroom includes students of widely varying abilities, it is important to have access to materials at other grade levels. Determine whether the content you purchase is

comprehensive and will allow you to choose materials from different grade levels or whether you are limited to the content for your specific grade. (This is particularly important when content will be used for individual interventions.)



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If content is limited, investigate whether the resource points you to additional interactive activities either within the program or on the web. For example, if you use two decimals lessons from the content but aren't finished teaching decimals, does the resource continue to assist your efforts? If students complete an activity but are still struggling, are there additional interventions available?

Question #4: Can my students access these resources?

In addition to accessing content for whole class instruction, some web based solutions also allow students to access content on computers. This helps teachers to make a connection between whole class instruction and individual student learning. Some online content providers add increased value by inviting students to access content at home for further review and exploration. Offline programs may also allow individual student access, but the program must first be installed on each computer.

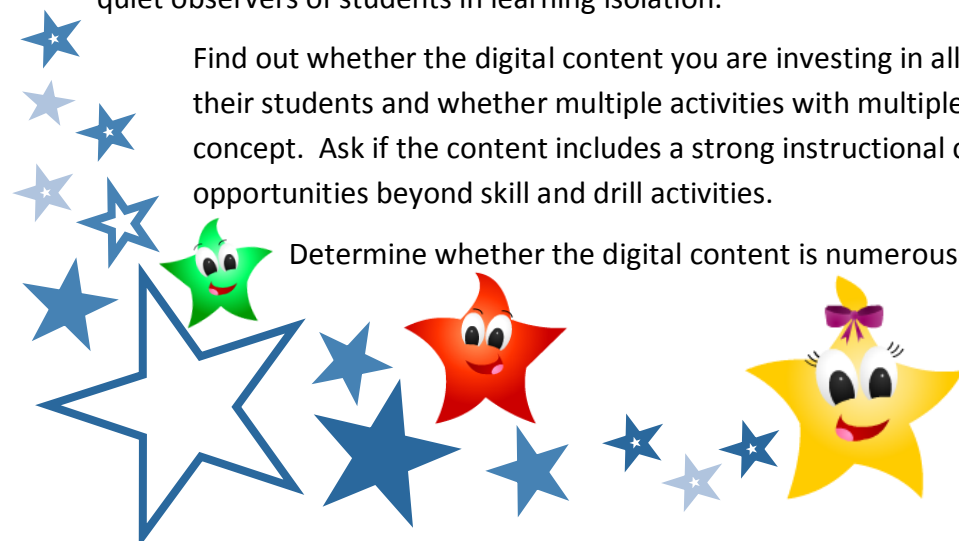
If student access is included, consider whether or not the content will still appeal to your students after experiencing it during whole class instruction. Is the activity engaging and are the questions randomized so students will still feel challenged during subsequent visits? Or does the program provide enough content options for each topic that the issue of repetitiveness is eliminated?

Question #5: Do these resources promote teacher involvement and offer flexibility?

Many software programs are designed for individual student use in learning isolation. A computerized program replaces a teacher's guidance by assessing students, offering recommended activities, and even adjusting activities to a student's ability level. While this type of program at first glance seems like an easy answer to individualized instruction, consider the implications of removing teacher guidance and peer collaboration from the learning process. Research has shown that technology, specifically instructional software, has been proven most effective when integrated into classroom instruction. Students who experienced teacher-led standards-based instruction with technology showed higher overall gains than students who experienced the same curricula and technology in an isolated lab setting. Teachers have the ability to match computer instruction with the children's development, the curriculum sequence, and the needs of particular groups of students. Teachers must be involved, "orchestrators" of technology, rather than quiet observers of students in learning isolation.

Find out whether the digital content you are investing in allows teachers to choose interventions for their students and whether multiple activities with multiple strategies for learning are available for each concept. Ask if the content includes a strong instructional component and problem solving opportunities beyond skill and drill activities.

Determine whether the digital content is numerous enough and flexible enough to be used for whole class instruction, center time, group work, and individual student remediation or enrichment.



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Question #6: Can student progress be monitored with these resources?

If students are allowed to access content on computers, find out if the content includes individual progress accounts. Particularly if content will be used for interventions, progress accounts allow teachers to view student scores on activities to determine if students are progressing toward mastery or if additional assistance is necessary.

Individual progress accounts can also help with formative assessment so teachers can determine what concepts need additional whole class instruction or individual intervention.

Question #7: Who created these resources?

It is important to consider the source of content you use in your classroom. Verify that the resources you are considering are research-based. Find out whether they were created by educational publishers, teachers, researchers, or a software company. Would you want a software programmer or graphic designer with no education degree teaching in your classroom? Is it logical that a researcher should be designing lessons for fifth graders if they have never taught fifth graders? Educational content written by educators with recent classroom experience may contain effective strategies and methods learned only by teaching concepts directly to students. Content designed by educators is usually organized and presented in ways that are simple and intuitive for other educators and students.

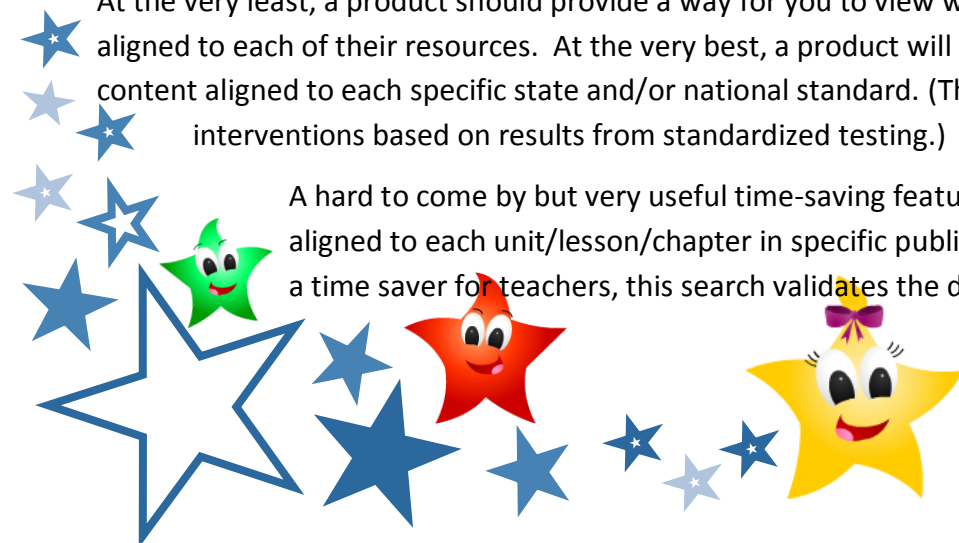
Equally important is the country in which the content was created. Find out if the content was created by educators in your country based on your standards and benchmarks or if it was created in another country and had to be modified to fit your country's curriculum. If it was modified, check what modifications were made to language, vocabulary, and teaching strategies as they vary greatly from country to country.

If considering purchasing resources that were developed in another country, look closely at their user statistics and research. Does the product have a customer base and research on effectiveness in your country?

Question #8: Can I search these resources by state and national standards? Can I search these resources by my publisher-based curriculum?

At the very least, a product should provide a way for you to view which state and/or national standards are aligned to each of their resources. At the very best, a product will provide a way for users to search and find content aligned to each specific state and/or national standard. (This is particularly helpful when searching for interventions based on results from standardized testing.)

A hard to come by but very useful time-saving feature is the ability to search and find resources aligned to each unit/lesson/chapter in specific publisher-based curriculums. In addition to being a time saver for teachers, this search validates the digital content by closely tying it to your district's specific curriculum.



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Question #9: Do these resources include voiceovers?

Voiceovers add value and increased functionality to interactive content. They help to differentiate instruction and to engage auditory learners. If voiceovers are present in paid content, they should sound professional, be of an appropriate accent for your country, and preferably offer the option to be turned on or off depending on the needs of specific students.

Question #10: Is there support for the content and are updates provided?

Content installations often don't go as planned. You will have questions as you begin to use new content, and there may be connectivity issues with web based solutions. At a minimum, you should expect a basic level of technical support via phone and email. You should place even more value on content from companies that go beyond the basics to help you integrate the content into classroom instruction or to assist you in locating specific resources via phone, email, and newsletter support.

Updates are a known part of content development, so you should expect updates to your content at least once a year. If the content is installed locally on your computer, find out if the company provides regular updates. If so, how do you know when updates are available? How are those updates delivered, and is there an additional charge? If the content is web-based, will updates appear automatically? How often are updates provided? How will you know what has been updated? Is there an additional charge?

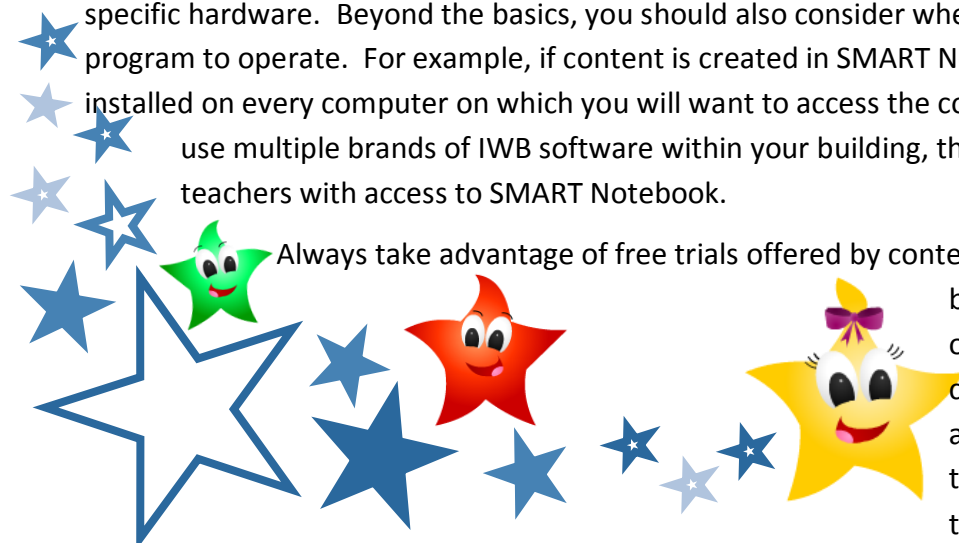
BONUS Question #11: How is this content delivered, and what program does it require?

Content will be either web-based or installation-based. Web-based content is delivered online. This means content can be accessed on any computer with an internet connection via a web browser. Some advantages include no installation, automatic updates, quick response to technical issues within the content, and easy student/teacher access from any computer anytime. Installation-based options require installation on your school's server or on individual computers where the content will be used. Access to this type of locally hosted content is not dependent on an internet connection.

As with any type of software, basic computer operating requirements should be explored. Many content providers offer a free trial which should be taken advantage of to test how the content performs on your specific hardware. Beyond the basics, you should also consider whether the content requires a specific program to operate. For example, if content is created in SMART Notebook software, that software must be installed on every computer on which you will want to access the content; and if you change IWB software or use multiple brands of IWB software within your building, the content will only be accessible by teachers with access to SMART Notebook.

Always take advantage of free trials offered by content providers to facilitate your evaluation,

but keep in mind that the trial may only offer access to a portion of the available content. Contact the content provider or attend an online demonstration for a more thorough evaluation of both the content and the company.



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As schools increasingly invest in technology hardware, teachers will need content to use those technologies effectively. All educators must be informed digital content advocates to help their schools select quality content that provides the most value. This table lists the ten questions (plus one bonus!) to ask before purchasing interactive digital content to assist with your personal evaluations.

**Note: White boxes indicate favorable answers. Gray boxes indicate unfavorable answers.*

	CONTENT TITLE			CONTENT TITLE		
	YES	NO	Comments	YES	NO	Comments
Are these resources already in my interactive technology software or online?						
Are these resources like an online textbook or could I create these resources myself?						
Are these resources limited in number?						
Can my students access these resources?						
Do these resources promote teacher involvement and offer flexibility?						
Can student progress be monitored?						
Are these resources research-based and are they created by educators?						
Can I search these resources by state and national standards?						
Can I search these resources by my curriculum?						
Do these resources include voiceovers?						
Is there email and phone support?						
Are updates provided?						
Are these resources easily accessible on any computer?						