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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers as well as teachers, this digest identifies for prospective purchasers various sources that offer reviews of educational computer software for English and the language arts. Following an introduction, the first section of the digest discusses content-specific as well as general educational computing subscription publications. The next two sections examine help available from professional associations and consortia services. The fourth section explores online sources for titles of recommended software, while the fifth discusses sources for published catalogs of approved software. The final section covers informal sources, such as independent distributors and consultants. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

HOW TO FIND GOOD COMPUTER SOFTWARE IN ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ARTS

Anne Auten

One of the great sports in the field of educational computing is called "find the good software," particularly in the field of English, reading, and the other language arts. Many English teachers, spurning the current unsatisfactory software developed for computer assisted instruction, have turned away from CAI and toward the use of the computer as a tool for teaching word processing in composition instruction and for computer database searching in units on library skills.

The ease of developing lower level computer software and the difficulty of programing some areas of the language arts curriculum are largely responsible for the less-than-ideal quality of software currently available. Because many aspects of language arts involve mental and verbal processes not adapted easily to computer-delivered instruction, software developers have been producing programs that, for the most part, are drill and practice lessons on aspects that are more easily defined: parts of speech, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, and syntax.

In a sense, the problem of finding good software is further complicated by the fact that some good CAI materials have appeared on the market--for example, tutorials that deal with the cloze procedure in teaching reading, sentence combining, and general comprehension. Educators now need the ability to evaluate software knowledgeably and the resources that provide thorough, up-to-date software reviews. For a brief discussion of evaluating language arts software, see the ERIC digest, "Software Evaluation for the Teacher of English Language Arts." This particular digest

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identifies for prospective purchasers various sources that offer reviews of language arts software.

REVIEWS IN SUBSCRIPTION PUBLICATIONS

The most readily available resource for software reviews is subscription publications. English and language arts educators now have a content-specific journal that reports software applications and evaluations in their discipline. Computers, Reading and Language Arts is a quarterly journal that features extensive reviews written by computer-using educational specialists. Each CRLA courseware evaluation follows a prescribed format that includes the program sequence, the program's educational intent and content, a discussion of the instructional technique(s) used by the program, and a description of any support literature or documentation provided by the publisher.

In addition to CRLA, English and language arts specialists have another content-specific resource in The Computing Teacher which, since it began publishing, has featured a monthly column, "Computers in the Teaching of English," edited by Robert Shostak and Lester Golub. English teachers are invited to submit reports on their use of computers in the classroom and to describe applications of particular software packages.

English and language arts specialists have found the monthly software reviews in other educational computing journals such as Electronic Learning, Electronic Education and Teaching and Computers to be a helpful resource. In addition to reviews of software designed for their discipline, they look at materials developed for other areas such as social studies, business communication, or word problem solving in mathematics. These programs often can be used to advantage as discussion starters for prewriting sessions or as exercises in logical thinking or persuasive argument in a language arts setting. Electronic

Education has presented an "Annual Buyer's Guide" for the last three years, an annotated list of programs grouped according to content area designed to assist educators with end-of-year purchasing decisions. The May/June 1984 issue of Teaching and Computers offered a pull-out supplement that briefly described more than 70 programs recommended by teachers. The latter journal, published by Scholastic, Inc. for elementary-level educators, also carries a regular feature called "Software Showcase: Software Recommended for Teachers by Teachers," that provides one- or two-paragraph evaluations. In addition, each issue offers a detailed discussion of a "Program of the Month," complete with a listing of the programming code. These noncommercial programs have been designed by teachers who make them available to others interested in computer-assisted instruction. Even such general computing journals as Personal Software: The Monthly Review of the Best Packages offer extensive reviews of a selection of educational software packages in each issue.

While not educational computing journals per se, three other subscription publications offer extensive reviews of educational software, and would serve well those teachers looking for good language arts software. The first is EPIE and Consumers Union Microcomputer Courseware PRO/FILES, a set of 8 1/2" x 11" file cards and file box, complete with subject matter dividers. Software in subject matter areas that could be effective in the English/language arts classroom include **The Arts**, **Business Education**, **Computer Literacy**, **Language Arts**, **Logic/Problem Solving**, **Reading**, and **Social Studies**. These headings are indicated in bold print at the top of each evaluation card, making them easy to file and find. Each monthly update of cards offers subscribers a summary and in-depth evaluation of 30 individual software packages distributed across the curriculum. The discussion of each package has four major strands: goals and objectives, contents, methods and approach, and evaluation and

management. Next is Courseware Report Card, a publication available in both elementary and secondary editions that presents two-to four-page summary/evaluations of 25-30 packages per issue. Users of Apple, Atari, Commodore, and Radio Shack microcomputers can subscribe to separate editions.

Finally, for those who have neither the time nor the money to subscribe to several educational computer journals, The Digest of Software Reviews: Education provides abstracts and indices of reviews from over 60 publications in the U.S. and Canada. A software program must have had a minimum of two published reviews to be selected for inclusion in The Digest.

Keep in mind that reviews of specific microcomputer brand-compatible programs are also published in journals by various hardware manufacturers. Apple computer's Journal of Courseware Review is an example.

HELP FROM PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

While neither of the two major support organizations for teachers of English, reading, and the other language arts--the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA)--regularly publishes software reviews, they are involved and interested in microcomputer usage in their content area classrooms. NCTE's Committee on Instructional Technology has published guidelines for evaluating language arts software; IRA's Committee on Technology and Reading has produced Guidelines for Educators designed to help reading teachers make the best possible use of the new technologies. Both associations publish journals that carry articles recommending various software programs. For example, the IRA journal, The Reading Teacher, carries a monthly column called "Printout" with CAI suggestions for elementary reading teachers. Apart from NCTE and IRA, the National Education Association supports an Educational

Computer Service that publishes a catalog of "NEA Teacher Certified" software. The software has been evaluated and approved by trained programmers and teachers using specific guidelines.

CONSORTIA SERVICES

At both national and state levels, computer-oriented educational consortia have been organized to offer educators such services as teacher inservice workshops, "help" hotlines for technical assistance, hardware acquisition, and software reviews and recommendations.

State and local consortia often provide, as one of their services, a library of software packages for teachers to preview. The January and February 1984 issues of Electronic Learning include a directory listing the location, size of inventory, and contact person for each state's noncommercial preview centers, many of which have been developed by state-supported regional consortia, as well as university labs, individual school districts, and educational associations. At the national level, the Educational Software Evaluation Consortium, representing 27 organizations involved in computer education throughout North America, has developed a list of favorably reviewed instructional software for K-12 classrooms.

ONLINE SOURCES

Using a microcomputer and a modem, educators can locate titles of recommended software by searching commercial information databases. The microSIFT Reviews, prepared by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory's Computer Technology Program, are available in the Resources in Computer Education (RICE) database and in the ERIC database. The reviews are also available in print editions through regional and local educational service agencies. The format of a microSIFT Review is a page of comments in the

areas of instructional objectives, instructional prerequisites, content and structure, potential uses, major strengths and weaknesses, and a 21-item checklist from the microSIFT software evaluation form.

Both the ICE and the ERIC files are provided by Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS) and are available to those who have a search contract with BRS in Latham, New York. The ERIC file is also available through the DIALOG Information Retrieval Service, as is the Microcomputer Index file. The Microcomputer Index is a subject and abstract guide to magazine articles from over 40 microcomputer journals, and includes software reviews published in those journals. As with BRS, DIALOG users are assigned a password in their search contract and are billed only for the time they use the database.

PUBLISHED CATALOGS

Facing the plethora of catalogs produced by software and hardware companies can be overwhelming. In addition to the catalogs published by manufacturers, individual distributors list software they claim is "teacher-tested." Companies such as Scholastic, Hammett, and the Society for Visual Education (SVE) produce catalogs listing what they describe as educator-evaluated and approved software. Most of these distributors are willing to offer a free examination and return policy.

When searching for potential program titles for English and language arts, from any catalog, educators should not hesitate to examine software descriptions in content areas other than English language arts. Shirley Keran, language arts software designer for the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC), suggests that many programs exist for other disciplines that can augment the work of the language arts teacher. If an English teacher believes that world events can be the topic for an essay, then

software developed for social studies could be applicable. "The epicenters of earthquakes and the waterways of voyageurs can be simulated, studied, and researched" says Keran. "Many simulations could be used in social studies for one set of activities and in language arts for another."

INFORMAL SOURCES

A final suggestion for educators interested in locating English and language arts software is to identify and befriend an independent distributor of software. A growing number of computer-using teachers are becoming distributors for companies whose products they have used successfully with their students. Many of these enthusiastic entrepreneurs attend trade shows, preview the latest software releases, and in general keep current with both software and hardware developments. As a rule, they are willing to consult with educational administrators interested in introducing CAI to their staffs, to offer inservices on software applications in the various content areas, and to make new software releases available for review.

All of the sources described in this digest are suggested only to assist educators in locating software for preview; because the criteria used for evaluation differ from one source to another, no qualitative review, no matter how positive it sounds, should be taken as an endorsement to purchase and use a piece of software without a preview by those who will be its ultimate users.

Sources for Software Reviews

Subscription Publications

Computers, Reading and Language Arts, Modern Learning Publishers, Inc., 1308 East 38th Street, Oakland, CA 94602, \$14/year.

Courseware Report Card, Educational Insights, 150 West Carob Street, Compton, CA 90220, \$59.50/year.

Digest of Software Reviews: Education, 1341 Bulldog Lane, Suite C, Fresno, CA 93710, \$52.95/year.

Electronic Education, Electronic Communications, Inc., Suite 220, 1311 Executive Center Drive, Tallahassee, FL 32301, \$18/year.

Electronic Learning, Scholastic Inc., 730 Broadway, New York, NY 10003-9538, \$19/year.

Journal of Courseware Review, Apple Computer, 20525 Mariana Avenue, Cupertino, CA 95014, \$5.95/issue.

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Personal Software, P.O. Box 2919, Boulder, CO 80323, \$24/year.

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HOW TO FIND GOOD COMPUTER SOFTWARE IN ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ARTS

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Large Scale Writing Assessment

A national concern over the decline in students' writing scores (as revealed in National Assessment of Educational Progress reports), serious doubts about what some of those scores signify, and a shift in focus from writing product to writing process in research and classroom practice have each given impetus to the change from *indirect* measures of writing proficiency (those that use "objective" test items) to *direct* measures (those that call for student writing samples). In their 1981 national survey, McCreedy and Melton found that of the twenty-four states claiming to have a writing assessment program, twenty-two require a writing sample as part of the assessment. Only two states rely solely on the use of objective tests.

Large scale writing assessments, however, involve a number of complex issues that are not always evident to decision-makers who are not specialists in measurement. In discussing how to and how not to conduct an assessment of student writing, McCaig (1982) warns that "an assessment plan which is incomplete or poorly conceived may produce findings which can be challenged and even dismissed as meaningless by critics who can document flaws in the process." This digest (1) outlines some of the approaches used in the implementation of large scale writing assessments, (2) examines some of the issues and problems surrounding the use of student writing samples, and (3) reports on various trends in state writing assessment projects.

Direct Versus Indirect Assessment

Direct and indirect writing assessments are radically different approaches focusing on different components of writing. Indirect measurements typically use multiple choice tests to assess the student's understanding of mechanics or language conventions: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, sentence construction, organization, and so on. Direct assessments, on the other hand, assess actual writing performance, since they require the students to produce a writing sample. Spandel and Stiggins (1981) suggest that the two approaches can best be compared in terms of their advantages and disadvantages.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • extent of information provided about the students' writing proficiency • fidelity to real world writing tasks • potential for positive user attitudes • relatively low test development cost • high face validity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential lack of uniformity regarding proficiencies assessed • high cost of scoring
Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high score reliability • relatively low scoring cost • high degree of control over skills tested 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of fidelity to real world writing tasks • reliance on reading • lack of face validity

Participants at a conference on assessment issues agreed that the use of writing samples is essential because of the instructional implications (McCreedy and Melton 1981). That is, if teachers know that students' writing ability will be evaluated by means of a direct measure, they will encourage more writing in the classroom.

Three Approaches to Scoring

Provided that writing assessments are conducted to determine the status of writing in a given state or school system and provided they are conducted to help improve classroom instruction, several factors need to be considered prior to the collection of writing samples: (1) the educational decisions to be made, on the basis of test results; (2) the writing purpose, audience, and type of writing to be required; and (3) the specific skills or traits to be judged along with the criteria used for evaluating

writing performance (Spandel and Stiggins 1981). It must also be remembered that ratings will vary depending upon the scoring procedure used. Quellmalz, in writing about scoring criteria (1982), notes that "criteria employed for evaluating student writing vary along a number of dimensions: from qualitative to quantitative; from general to specific; from comprehensive, full discourse features to isolated features; from vague guidelines to replicable, objective guidelines." Scoring options range from holistic scoring (general impressionistic marking) to analytic and primary trait scoring.

Holistic Scoring

Holistic scoring of a writing sample is based upon the reader's overall impression of the effectiveness of a piece of writing. Papers are scored by trained raters on a numerical scale, usually a four-point scale. Once the writing samples are collected, the raters or scorers sort the samples into four stacks, relating the quality of the essay only to other papers in the group rather than to a predetermined example of "good" writing. Papers are typically read by two raters, and the scores they assign a writing sample are summed into a total score. If there is a discrepancy of two score points, the score is reconciled by yet a third reader/rater.

Primary Trait Scoring

Primary trait scoring focuses on a specific rhetorical characteristic or trait of a given piece of writing. It is based on the premises that all writing is done in terms of a specific audience and that writing, if successful, will have the desired effect on that audience. Lloyd-Jones (1977) identifies two goals of primary trait scoring: (1) to define what segment of discourse will be evaluated (e.g., explanatory, expressive, persuasive), and (2) to train readers to render holistic judgments accordingly. A scoring guide for primary trait analysis may consist of the exercise itself; a description of the rhetorical traits of the writing; an interpretation of the exercise indicating how each element in the task is expected to affect the student; an interpretation of how the situation of the exercise is related to the primary trait; sample papers that are representative of each score point; and a discussion of why each sample paper was scored as it was (McCreedy and Melton 1981). One difference between holistic and primary trait scoring is that with primary trait scoring, students' papers are being measured against external criteria, whereas with holistic scoring, papers are compared with one another.

Analytical Scoring

If primary trait scoring is a situation-specific analysis of writing, analytical scoring is a thorough, trait-by-trait analysis. The identified traits reflect those components of a writing sample that are considered important to any piece of writing in any context. Diederich (1974), the originator of analytical scoring, for example, has identified eight common traits: ideas, organization, wording, flavor (tone), usage, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting. Others may use traits more general such as content, organization, focus and support, and mechanics. If enough components are analyzed, this scoring procedure can provide a comprehensive picture of writing performance. However, the components need to be explicit and well defined so that the raters understand and agree upon the basis for making judgments about the writing sample.

In relating these scoring approaches to classroom applications, Spandel (1981) observes that holistic scoring offers a broad base for a discussion of what makes a piece of writing generally good or bad. Analytical scoring can take this discussion one step further by identifying those traits of components that make a piece of writing effective. And, by being situation-specific, primary trait scoring focuses on the importance of audience to a piece of writing.

Issues and Problems

Essential to the quality of assessment and the value of scoring procedures used are the reliability and validity of the scores generated by the assessment. Specifically, the scoring criteria should be applicable uniformly within a rating session and

from one rating session to another. Furthermore, these ratings should correlate with other measures of student writing. Even if the assessment instrument is reliable and valid, spurious scores can result from the development of poor exercises, poor test administration or environment, or poor scoring procedures (Stiggins, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1980). Scorers must understand and agree upon the criteria applied to a piece of writing. Thus, inadequate training of scorers may also influence or skew the results of an assessment.

The choice of topic (or "prompt") to be written is another factor that may influence scores. Students may write more enthusiastically on some topics than on others, resulting in better quality writing. A student's background and prior knowledge will also affect the "expertise" a student brings to a piece of writing. Or, depending upon the student's interpretation of a writing prompt, he or she may write persuasive discourse in response to a prompt intended for expository discourse.

Time and cost are two other factors that may influence the decision for large scale writing assessment. Stiggins (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1980) separates cost factors into those that are developmental and those that are administrative. Developmental costs will vary depending on whether a previously designed assessment instrument is used or a new one developed. If one is to forego the expense of constructing a new scoring instrument, expense will still be incurred for the securing, reviewing, evaluating, and selecting of appropriate exercises and scoring guides that do exist. Administrative costs involve those associated with test administration, the selection of test administrators, the distribution of materials, and the collection of test materials.

Then there are the scoring costs—the time required to train raters and the time required to rate papers. According to data collected by Quellmaiz (1982), the training time for holistic and primary trait scoring averages two to four hours, and for analytical scoring averages six to eight hours. Test reuse is another cost factor. Stiggins (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1980) states that "with indirect assessment, the high cost of test construction can be amortized over repeated administration and the recurring scoring costs are very low. However, with direct assessment, although the initial development costs are low, the scoring costs remain high with each use." In a 1982 dissertation Bauer compared the reliabilities and the cost-efficiencies of these three methods of direct assessment. Based on her results, Bauer concluded that the analytical method was the most reliable and the holistic method was the most cost-efficient in grading a large number of essays (see ED 225 171).

A 1979 study by Fredrick identified some of the problems that states have encountered with their writing assessment endeavors: (1) arrangements for a place large enough and suitable enough for the scoring, (2) coordinating release time for teachers to act as scorers, (3) adhering to a rigid time schedule during the scoring session, (4) not enough time or money, and (5) finding or designing a variety of writing skill tasks. Her survey concluded with a list of recommendations to others, who are planning a writing assessment, some of which are as follows:

- formulate writing objectives and focus research questions before the assessment,
- use language arts specialists to advise on content and to react to items prior to pilot testing,
- clarify traits to be measured,
- include clear and concise directions, and
- use actual performance on practical writing, such as messages, letters, forms and so forth, instead of the proofreading type of assessment found in most multiple choice tests.

Trends in Writing Assessment

A national study conducted in 1981 by McCready and Melton collected data from 42 state departments of education. Of the 22 states using a writing sample, most of the states indicated that they used holistic scoring procedures, with three states

using primary trait techniques, one using analytical, and three states using both holistics and analytic scoring. In fact, when comparing their study with the earlier study by Fredrick (1979), McCready and Melton found a change in preference from either holistic or primary trait scoring to a use of holistic and analytical methods, which appeared to offer a broader base for determining basic competencies in writing and assessing educational progress.

The May 1984 issue of CAPTRENDS, published by the Center for Performance Assessment, reveals diverse environments for the solicitation of writing samples. Some states used untimed writing samples, while others set a 25-minute limit. Some states allowed students to revise their initial drafts, while yet another state offered less skilled writers a number of prewriting suggestions to help them get started.

Large scale writing assessments are useful, but complex. This digest has attempted to identify a few of the issues and problems that need to be addressed in such an endeavor. However, as Spandel and Stiggins conclude in their booklet, *Direct Measures of Writing Skills: Issues and Applications, Revised Edition* (1981), "There is not now, nor will there ever be, a single best way to assess writing skills. Each individual educational assessment and writing circumstance presents unique problems to the developer and use of writing tests. Therefore, great care must be taken in selecting the approach and the methods to be used in each writing assessment. Methods used in one context to measure one state of relevant writing skill should not be generalized to other writing contexts without careful consideration of writing circumstances."

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