

PRODUCT reviews

- KidBiz3000
- Hewlett-Packard vp6320 Multimedia Projector
- GTCO CalComp InterWrite SchoolPad 400

KidBiz3000

By Martha L. Perez

One of the greatest challenges I face as an eighth-grade ELL teacher is getting my students motivated to read. It can be difficult to find engaging content for just one of my students, let alone all 30. Recently, I discovered a product that not only motivates my students to read but also engages them in learning about what's happening in our world.

KidBiz3000 is a Web-based program that differentiates reading instruction for grades 2–8 by providing students with a daily current events article written at their specific reading level. Students go through a five-step routine that starts with checking their secure KidBiz3000 e-mail account. Here, students are asked to respond to a short prompt. I have found this to be a great way for triggering the students' prior knowledge, while also preparing them for the reading assignment. Next, students read the article of the day—written at their reading level with vocabulary and audio supports included. After reading the article, students' comprehension and vocabulary are assessed through an eight-question activity. Students receive immediate feedback and based on their performance, KidBiz3000 continually adjusts reading levels accordingly. The final two steps involve students' written response to a thought question and participation in an online poll related to that day's article.

A great feature for me is the variety of reports automatically generated



KidBiz3000 presents the same basic content at many different reading levels, as these two examples show.

by the program. Through the data provided by these reports, I am able to further assess my students' needs in reading, read their writing samples, monitor which parts of the program they use, and even look at class performance by NCLB subgroups.

Getting started was an easy process that involved sending the company my class list with the students' current reading levels. Within my three-computer classroom, I have a rotating schedule in which each student gets to use KidBiz3000 for 30 minutes per day. More than half of my students use the ELL version; they read the articles in Spanish and complete the activities in English. Although all of my students like using the product,

my predominantly Spanish-speaking students are always the most eager to start their KidBiz3000 activities for the day.

I believe KidBiz3000 has been such a hit with my students for three primary reasons. First, students get to read interesting content about current events. Second, they are able to read the content at their own level. Third, they receive immediate feedback on the activities, which allows them to monitor their own progress and challenges them to improve. One of my students summed it up nicely when she said, "I like KidBiz3000 because it helps me understand that when I read I have to pay close attention. It keeps me interested

in the article and helps me better my reading skills by giving me work that will really challenge me.”

I believe that for elementary and middle school teachers seeking to provide supplemental reading and writing support, exposure to current events, and a practical use of technology in the classroom, KidBiz3000 is

a unique, teacher-friendly tool that helps support daily instruction.

Price (suggested retail): \$22 per student per year (includes assessment, set-up and support); \$99 per teacher per year (includes set-up and support). Volume discounts are available.

Requirements: This Web-based product is Mac or PC compatible.

More Info: Achieve3000, Inc., <http://www.achieve3000.com> or 1.888.968.6822



Martha L. Perez is an eighth-grade ELL teacher at Julia de Burgos Elementary School in the School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She has been teaching in Philadelphia for 16 years and holds a master's degree in educational administration.

Hewlett-Packard vp6320 Multimedia Projector

By J.V. Bolkan

Bargain-basement DLP projectors can be purchased for less than \$1,000, but I have no problem defining the \$1,300 HP vp6320 as a value projector.

In fact, HP produces a sibling, the vp6310, that sells for well less than \$1,000. Still, the outstanding feature package of the 6320 makes it quite competitive, despite the extra couple of hundred dollars you'll spend.

The 6320 is a relatively high resolution projector with a native 1024 × 768 resolution. This is a huge improvement over the typical 800 × 600 resolutions of cheaper models. For classroom use where the predominant input is a computer, the resolution alone may justify the cost.

If you need more, the 6320 can produce 2,000 lumens, 25% more than most low-range projectors. In use, the projector is very bright, enabling me to use it as a very large computer monitor in a bright room with the drapes open. Contrast is rated at 2,500:1. Virtually any classroom can be made dark enough to project an acceptable image.

Rounding out the value aspects of the projector is an outstanding 4,000-hour lamp life. Fully double the expected life of some competitors, the bulb itself is also relatively inexpensive to replace at \$299. Both the projector and the bulb are covered under a one-



The integrated carrying handle makes this light-weight projector easily portable.

year warranty that can be extended to two or three years.

The projector has a somewhat unconventional, and I think, attractive appearance, thanks mostly to its integrated carrying handle and five-sided design. Weighing less than eight pounds, the 6320 can easily be moved from classroom to classroom.

The 6320, like most modern projectors, is very good at connecting to various input devices and automatically adjusting itself to the format. Even when running non-native resolutions, the image was sharp and virtually without artifacts.

The 6320 has attracted significant interest from the videophile sector. Its long bulb life, brightness and contrast features, combined with its high-definition resolution make it an affordable replacement for a home-entertainment system and of course, for showing movies, television, and other video content in the classroom.

Inputs include standard computer VGA, RCA (composite video), S-video, and audio RCA. Outputs include USB for mouse control, a VGA pass-through for a second monitor,

DVI-D, and RS-232. Computer modes supported include SXGA down to VGA and a wide array of Mac modes including MAC LC, G4, and iMac DV.

I was a bit disappointed in the on-board audio capabilities of the 6320. Although I have yet to find good audio in a low-priced projector, the rest of the specifications raised my hopes. A 6-watt monoaural speaker just won't crank out enough sound to do most multimedia content justice. Even in power-saving mode, the 34 dBA produced by the cooling fan is enough to get in the way of the weak audio. As with all the other projectors in this class I've looked at, you will want to have an auxiliary sound source.

Packed in the box is a nice 10' power cable. I've never understood why so many projector manufactur-



ers include short power cables for a device that is designed to sit in the middle of the room. Fairly long USB and VGA cables are also included, along with a wireless remote

control with mouse capabilities (battery included).

All in all, HP has done a wonderful job of adding a number of high-value features without having the price balloon out of reach for most schools. If you can afford the slight premium

in price, you'll be rewarded with a superior product that will more than justify its initial cost.

Price (suggested retail): \$1,299 (standard warranty)

More Info: Hewlett-Packard, <http://www.hp.com>

GTCO CalComp InterWrite SchoolPad 400

By J.V. Bolkan

CalComp's InterWrite SchoolPad 400 is a combination of refined hardware and targeted software that should appeal to all educators, but especially those in K–8 classrooms.

Essentially a relatively simple digitizing tablet with a modest 6" × 8" active surface, the SchoolPad has a few enhancements that would be impressive were it just a digitizer. A slick rechargeable stylus with an ingenious charging bay built into the bezel of the tablet is a nice start. An estimated 40-hour battery cycle for the tablet itself is also impressive. The ability to have multiple pads active on the Bluetooth network is another cool thing.

Continuing on the hardware side, the tablet is built like a lightweight brick. The hard blue plastic body looks and feels solid and almost indestructible, but it is still light enough for even the youngest students to easily pass back and forth. The stylus is neither too thick for comfortable use nor so thin that youngsters will have trouble controlling it.

Despite the well-designed device, the hardware is not the star of this product. The value of the SchoolPad is its software, obviously designed with educational practitioner input. The depth of the feature set is almost overwhelming, but never difficult to understand or maneuver through.

Most first-time users will probably have way too much fun with the vari-

ous pen and line-drawing options. The SchoolPad enables you to draw directly on the desktop or in virtually any application, such as a presentation program. This is a great tool for pointing out and highlighting on-screen elements. By default, your scribbling, annotations, and other doodles aren't actually made "to" the desktop or application file, but rather to a seamlessly created copy of the screen. This enables you to freely mark up that laboriously created presentation during first period, then do the same thing all over again in the next period.

You can save the annotations, and many programs will allow you to directly modify the file itself. This is a common theme as you explore the rich software—options are deep and almost without exception default to the choice most teachers will use most often.

Drawing on the screen can be quite addictive. In addition to the various colored pen choices you'd expect, there are some nifty precreated pen effects and the ability to modify and create your own. I particularly liked the automatic outline pen with a bright lime green glow around the purple line color. Another feature sure to bring smiles to younger students is the image ink. This is a line type that is made up of a series of mini images; the yellow bananas are my favorite.

Although the various bright and fun drawing tools can liven up a classroom presentation, there is much more meat in the image library.

Perhaps the deepest area of the InterWrite software, the image library

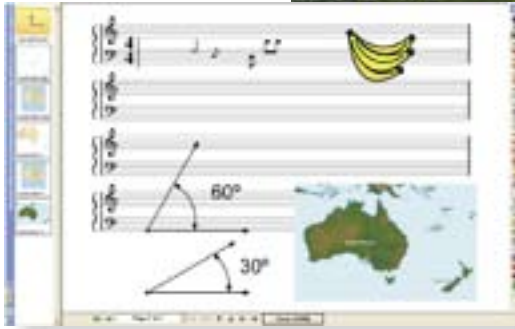


has such useful things as a version of the periodic table, hundreds and hundreds of maps, and a seemingly endless supply of useful icons/clip art. All images are easily resized and can be layered and remain moveable. In fact, you can write a word with the pen on top of a map, then move the letters of the word to a new location. As you might have come to expect, the library is fully customizable. You can create and import your own artwork or download extra images from CalComp or many other sources.

The SchoolPad is preloaded with a number of lessons that are almost ready to go, mostly for the lower and middle grades, but most of the features can easily be used with older students just as effectively—just don't expect them to be as easily amused by a smiley face stencil.

Although the SchoolPad is a fine device on its own, it really shines when combined with a whole-class display system such as a projector or interactive whiteboard. Of course, GTCO CalComp sells such a whiteboard, but the SchoolPad will work

You can proclaim your fondness for fruit directly onto the desktop or most applications with the fun and vibrant drawing tools.



Among the handy, resizable graphics included are complete musical scoring components, a huge selection of maps in many formats, math and science tools, and more bananas.

LOOK FOR THIS SEAL



It's your assurance that a product or service has demonstrated alignment with ISTE's National Educational Technology Standards (NETS). You'll find this Seal of Alignment on products, services, and resources ISTE has rigorously reviewed and determined meet specific NETS standards for Students (NETS•S), Teachers (NETS•T), and/or Administrators (NETS•A).

To date, more than 90% of states already use NETS in their technology, assessment, and/or curriculum plans.

Visit www.iste.org/standards/ to learn more.

Look for the ISTE NETS Review and Seal of Alignment when evaluating your Ed Tech purchases.

with other brands as well. Presentation features abound. The SchoolPad can be configured to show only a "spotlight" portion of the screen, and yes, the spotlight shape is customizable, and many common shapes are preconfigured. You can also use a "window shade" to reveal the screen in increments. There really are few things you can't do either out of the box, or by creating your own effects.

Installing the InterWrite software itself was a breeze, as was setting up the SchoolPad. Unfortunately, I can't say the same about the required TDK Bluetooth adapter. It may be the world's most balky USB device, or I may have been tired when I first installed it. Regardless, it doesn't install seamlessly under Windows XP. The main problem seems to be that the device drivers are unsigned—a fact that Windows told me four times during the install of what should be simple drivers. Once I convinced Windows to install the device anyway, it wouldn't work. Rebooting didn't help. You'll need to manually reinstall the drivers from Windows' device manager. The Bluetooth network worked fine after-

wards, but it was frustrating for me and potentially a problem for many classroom teachers. The adapter is discontinued by TDK. CalComp should find another, newer Bluetooth partner.

The SchoolPad is a bit on the expensive side. However, precious few devices seem to have been built so carefully and successfully with the educator in mind. You might save a little money trying to adapt a vanilla digitizer tablet to the uses already built into the SchoolPad, but you'd spend way too much time and never reach the sophistication and ease of use.

Price (suggested retail): \$585 (\$497 school discount)

Requirements: Windows or Macintosh, USB port (for the Bluetooth adapter).

More Info: GTCO CalComp, <http://www.gtccocalcomp.com>



J.V. Bolkan is a senior editor for L&L with more than 20 years of journalism experience in the high tech field. He especially favors graphics and video hardware and software, as well as a good piece of fruit.