

PRODUCT reviews

- BookFlix
- New Standard Keyboard
- Kid Works Deluxe 2.05

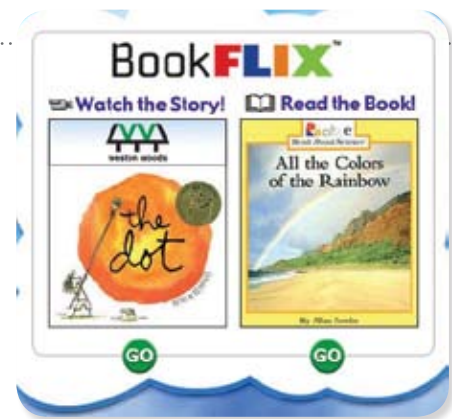
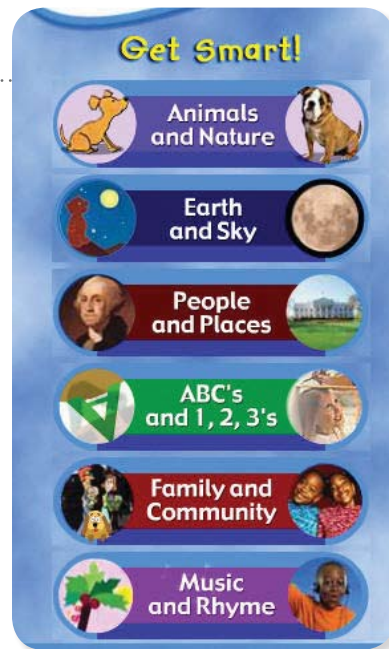
BookFlix

By Sarah McPherson

BookFlix is an online literacy resource for PK–3 comprised of fiction and non-fiction e-books paired according to nine themes aligned with U.S. literacy/early reading standards. The fiction selections are from Westin Woods; the non-fiction books are from Children’s Press and other Scholastic sources. The fiction selections can be viewed as an animated story with audio text-to-speech highlighting each word as it is spoken. Some selections are also available in Spanish for English language learners or elementary Spanish instruction. The related non-fiction selection is presented in a flipbook format with the Read-Along feature and the word-by-word highlighting available. Definitions are available for key vocabulary highlighted in the text. The nine themes are: Animals and Nature; Earth and Sky; Family and Community; People and Places; Music and Rhyme; ABC’s and 1, 2, 3’s; Adventure, Imagination, and Celebrations.

BookFlix can be described in terms of universal design for learning (UDL) developed by Rose and Meyer, primary researchers at the Center for Applied Special Technologies (CAST). The principles of UDL are grounded in brain-based research identifying three neurological networks working together in the learning process:

- *Recognition networks* focus on specific content: who, what, where, and when.



- *Strategic networks* focus on the specific process or medium for learning how to do something: using problem solving, critical thinking, predicting, and drawing conclusions.
- *Affective networks* focus on the value or emotional outcome: the enjoyment and appreciation of learning, choice, challenge, and control of one’s own learning.

At CAST, text-to-speech is described as integral to UDL for children who are blind or visually impaired, and those who are dyslexic. BookFlix can easily be aligned to the principles of UDL with its use of multiple formats and types of media for developing literacy skills, vocabulary, reading, and conceptual understanding. The program uses streaming video, closed captioning, and word-by-word audio highlighting of each word as it is spoken. In addition to use in initial reading/literacy instruction, BookFlix is appropriate for young special needs populations and English language learners.

The recognition networks are stimulated through multiple media formats of more than 80 book pairs to maximize learning. The book pairs indicate the two ways to access the books— Watch the Story or Read the Book. The non-fiction match is primarily science-based to develop the background of experience for interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction. The Read Along feature is activated by clicking on a button. Vocabulary and speech features are applied to definitions of key words by clicking on the sound icon.

BookFlix supports the strategic networks with multiple activities to practice reading and learning the concepts, espoused as critical to gaining confidence with text. Students are given ample and varied opportunities for practicing reading. The audio features, key vocabulary, and Spanish options provide ongoing feedback and support for learning. The program displays a list of the various resources accompanying each pair of books. Students can access these resources to enhance learning and understanding.

The high-interest engaging video stories and text develop content knowledge and vocabulary skills in young readers, giving them control of their

learning, thus triggering the affective network domain for learning. If students use the program independently, they can advance through the stories at their own pace, controlling their learning. A student can hear the story and see the words in Spanish. Key vocabulary is defined and, again, is supported by audio text-to-speech. The games add an element of play and challenge to the activities that further enhances the development of vocabulary, understanding, and critical thinking. Correctly answering clues enables students to complete puzzles. Audio features are available for the clues and answer choices as feedback and reinforcement. These multiple ways to interact with the content, vocabulary, and reading can only enhance engagement in the learning process.

BookFlix comes with lesson plans for suggested instructional activities for each content theme. The lesson plans are aligned with national standards. Educator resources are provided in a guide that contains an overview, ideas, and strategies for classroom organization for using the product. Additional resources address suggestions for parent use of BookFlix at home.

BookFlix is a comprehensive program for language acquisition. The book-pairing is an added-value providing interdisciplinary curriculum materials at the primary level. The fiction stories are selections common to literacy development that capitalize on students' background experience. Relating the fiction to non-fiction expands the student's background, making connections to other content areas. The appropriate reading level is presented in

the non-fiction materials with the same developmental support of vocabulary, text-to-speech, and practice activities available. The depth of the materials and rich resources for reinforcement make BookFlix an excellent early reading resource for young students in class and at home.

BookFlix runs on Windows and Mac systems and requires a high-speed Internet connection (T1 or better). Annual subscription rates are \$1,259 per building.

Scholastic Library Publishing

<http://www.scholastic.com>, 1.800.621.1115



Dr. Sarah McPherson, chairperson of Instructional Technology at New York Institute of Technology, teaches courses in technology integration into language and in using technology for diversity, including students with special needs and English language learners.

New Standard Keyboard

By J.V. Bolkan

The New Standard Keyboard (NSK) from the company with the same name may be new, it may marginally qualify as a real keyboard in some circles, and it is certainly in another universe from standard. At \$69.95, (currently on sale for \$59.98) the NSK is not really cheap enough for a “what the heck, I’ll give it a try” impulse buy.

The NSK takes on every beginning typist’s nemesis, the venerable QWERTY key layout. Unlike the cult-spawning Dvorak configuration, and QWERTY itself, the NSK keyboard layout is designed to appeal to logic rather than typing mechanics. The keys are arranged in alpha order rather than organized to optimize keystroke-finger ergonomics. The obvious benefit is that younger users not only have an easier time finding letters, they also reinforce their alphabet memorization. Just as obvious, the layout isn’t ultimately as



efficient—especially if you live in the current universe where you’re almost certain to run into QWERTY keyboards.

Much has been said and many rants launched in the decades-old battle between Dvorak and QWERTY enthusiasts. The NSK layout, if the company is lucky, could join the debate. The reality is that despite much misinformation, proficient Dvorak and QWERTY typists are essentially identical in efficiency. I’d imagine the NSK would have some penalty in ultimate efficiency, but it probably wouldn’t affect WPM typing speeds as much as layout enthu-

siasts from other camps would have you believe. If the whole world switched magically to an alpha-ordered layout, well, we’d survive. In the absence of the magic switch, typists proficient in NSK layout are unlikely to be common.

I think I’d have been more open to the “non-QWERTYness” of the keyboard if the company hadn’t decided to break almost every other keyboard/typist convention it could. The tiny keyboard has only 53 keys, and of those, 6 are duplicates, leaving a measly 47 keys to do what 100+ keys on traditional keyboards accomplish. This key “efficiency” is accomplished by doing away with dedicated numerals and the function (F1–F12) keys. We’re all used to basic combination keystrokes such as Shift to create capital letters. The NSK design takes this concept to the 5th dimension. Each of the alpha keys has five characters crowded onto

it. In addition to the Shift function (labeled Cap on the NSK), you have Num, Sym key, SpFn, and Alt keys to choose from. Because most of these are duplicated on each side of the mildly curved key layout, the NSK can easily be controlled with a single hand, if you can figure out which combo you need. A standard key-sized shift “bar” and cursor/arrow keys in the center of the layout are easily defensible and even potentially desirable changes to the status quo, but I found them just more strangeness I had to overcome.

Because of the paucity of keys, the

NSK is tiny, yet the keys are full sized and quite useable by even sausage-fingered hunt-and-peck editors. Key travel is a bit light for my preferences, but if you manage to learn the layout enough to touch type at any decent speed, the light touch would be appreciated.

We got the colorful original model; it is also available in a more subdued black and gray. Lots of my coworkers snickered at the “toy” keyboard I had connected through the USB port of my computer, but even the garish colors of the keys aren’t as flamboyant as the layout.

The NSK would make a great addition to most lower elementary classrooms. Aside from the benefits of reinforcing alphabet memorization, the unique layout has potential in assistive technology applications. Additionally, the keyboard is ergonomically friendly. Perhaps more important to younger students, the small size, lower number of keys, and insanely bright colors are just plain friendly.

New Standard Keyboards, Inc.

<http://www.newstandardkeyboards.com>
\$69.95, USB connector for Windows XP and above.

Kid Works Deluxe 2.05

By J.V. Bolkan

Once you have an application as popular and successful as Knowledge Adventure’s Kid Works Deluxe, programming can focus on polish. Version 2.05 of the venerable PK–4 multimedia software practically gleams.

Although the version number suggests a very minor revision, the program actually got a new look and compatibility with Windows Vista and Mac OS X.

Kid Works is a publishing tool combining child-friendly word processing with graphics and multimedia tools that young students will not be able to resist.

Users begin by signing in, either as an individual or to a group. From there, you’re presented with three options: Create New Book, Open Book, and Open Story Starters. Choosing to create a new book opens the simple, yet elegant school desk interface. Sitting on the desk is a book with a default title (My Story) and a byline (from your login name). You can easily change the title, which automatically and intuitively becomes the default file name. You can also change the byline, as well as the cover graphics and color.

Opening the book shows two blank pages, each with a pair of icons representing writing or painting. Choosing the pencil icon opens the word processing toolbox. The tools, icons, and concept are inspired and seem to strike a great balance between accessibility and useability.

The word processor module accepts graphics, including student art and photographs. It also has speech capabilities, both recording and text-to-speech.

The painting portion of the program is really the heart of Kid Works Deluxe, and where the new look really pays off. The school desk metaphor works well here. Users can color with virtually unlimited crayon hues, use some of the hundreds of included “stickers,” and import many standard graphic formats, including photos and drawings from other programs. Users can also create complex drawings from scratch using the robust drawing/painting tools.

Knowledge Adventure includes some basic curriculum projects ready for customizing, but I doubt many teachers will have trouble finding ways to use this program, nor will they find it diffi-



cult to motivate their students to use it.

Installation was a snap. The disk is hybrid Windows/Macintosh. Although Vista is supported, it also runs on XP. Mac users will need OSX 10.4 or better. If your computer runs a supported OS, performance will be very good.

You will want to use headphones in the classroom. Virtually every keystroke, mouse-click, or other action in Kid Works is accompanied by a sound effect. The program costs \$30 per license, or \$899 for an unlimited network version.

Knowledge Adventure

www.knowledgeadventureschool.com



J.V. Bolkan has become the acquiring editor for ISTE’s book publishing department. He has been reviewing and writing about multimedia and technology for more than 20 years.