

Should I Download That App? A Ten Question Checklist for Choosing Tools Worth Your—and Your Students'—Time | EdSurge News

Many educators are playing the student engagement game. They wonder, “How can I get my students excited to learn? How can I ensure they will not get distracted easily?” Since tablets, Chromebooks, and smartphones have become commonplace in classrooms, the easy answer is to find a new shiny tech tool.

Let’s be honest—flashy, colorful, unique apps will hook your students, but not usually for long. Is this emphasis (or overemphasis) on apps the right way for students to experience learning? Will their attention hold in the long-term?

We don’t think so.

Whether you are a classroom teacher, instructional coach, or administrator, ask yourself these ten questions before tapping GET, INSTALL, or BUY.

Putting Pedagogy First

1. What content do we want students to learn?

Before thinking about incorporating technology, clearly identify what you want students to understand as a result of their experiences. Will the app help them achieve these understandings, or will a few bells and whistles cause more distraction than they are worth? Apps that add dramatic music or flashy avatars are fun, and they can be part of a sound teaching strategy when used selectively.

2. What skills will our students practice or refine when they use this app?

There are amazing tech tools out there that allow students to whip up a professional looking presentation, video, or podcast in a matter of minutes. The final product may look or sound impressive, but do your students have to research, read, analyze, and design in order to make it? Consider the instructional design element, and be sure that your students will be required to utilize skills like collaboration and communication before or while using the app.

3. Will our students be consumers or creators when they use this app?

Will the app help [students] achieve these understandings, or will a few bells and whistles cause more distraction than they are worth?

As of fall 2015, [92% of Americans age 18 and up own a smartphone](#) and [three-quarters of teens have access to a smartphone](#). Digital resources, digital creation, and digital communication are imperatives in both academia and business. The digital world can be a place to consume cat videos and get sucked into violent video games—or a place to add new ideas and learn with people who share a common goal. Educators should choose apps that require students to create, contribute, and publish, instead of apps that encourage students to sit and get.

4. What are my students' needs, and can this app meet them?

Many devices have assistive features like dictionaries, talk-to-text, and audio enhancements. Does the app work with those features? Does it have additional features like personalized learning tracks or dyslexia fonts that might be helpful for teachers and students? When technology can help a teacher synthesize data, identify student needs, and create an intervention on the spot, everyone wins.

Choosing the Best Product for the Job

5. Is there a better app that achieves the same purpose?

Avoid impulsively purchasing an app because it looks “cool.” Instead, make sure you’re getting the best app for the job of meeting student needs while staying within your school’s price range. Two tips: When searching for an app in the iTunes or Google Play stores, related apps will appear in the search results. Also, when you land on an app’s “page,” check out similar apps and see what else customers bought.

6. Is there a comparable/better app at a cheaper price?

Another option for exploring the internet’s wide range of apps is website [Apps Gone Free](#), which provides daily notifications of notable apps that are temporarily offered free of charge. To take full advantage of this resource, stock up on licenses of the same apps to distribute at your convenience. Also, reach out to colleagues in your [personal learning network](#) (PLN) to find out if they know of more affordable options.

7. Is there an app on your devices that already does the same thing?

Whenever an app is requested, it doesn't hurt to see if a comparable app has already been bought by the school/district.

Whenever an app is requested, it doesn't hurt to see if a comparable app has already been bought by the school/district. (Maintaining a list of purchased apps can streamline this process.) You can always point the requesting teachers in the direction of the similar app and ask that they take a look at it. Also, offer professional learning that meaningfully

exposes educators to the available tools at their disposal to prevent redundant requests.

Keeping Your Vision in Sight

8. Does the app promote our school and district "best practices"?

Make sure the app aligns with classroom/school/district vision and goals. For example, there are a lot of flashcard-like apps for memorization of math facts. Although there is a time and place for this, we would rather see students first develop number sense and flexible procedures with numbers, drawings, and manipulatives. To ensure an app aligns with "best practices," refer to previous professional learning experiences, research, and/or consult with colleagues.

9. How will we inform everyone else?

Once you find and download a useful app, you'll want to make sure as many educators and students benefit from it as possible. So, share with all teachers whose students could take advantage of it. When many teachers and students have access to the same app, there are more opportunities for everyone to describe how to best use it in the classroom.

10. Have we talked to the app creators?

Do not hesitate to reach out to the developers who created, designed, and continue to improve your apps.

Do not hesitate to reach out to the developers who created, designed, and continue to improve your apps. You'll likely find them on Twitter, through contact pages on the company website, or within the app itself. [When educators build relationships with tech companies](#), the company gets suggestions first-hand from educators, and the school gets the app updates they need sooner.

One final note: Educators should always read the app's privacy policy to ensure it complies with state and federal regulations to keep students' data protected. Find out if your school or district has vetted the app for this purpose.

Educators should be more intentional and selective about the apps they use to ensure students are exposed to high quality tools that maximize learning experiences for all parties involved. Throughout our careers, both of us have encountered countless devices that are loaded with a plethora of unorganized apps, only a handful of which are regularly being used by teachers and students. So, use this checklist—and share it with others!

Ross Cooper (@RossCoops31) is the Supervisor of Instructional Practice K-12 in the Salisbury Township School District (1:1 MacBook/iPad) in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Kerry Gallagher (@KerryHawk02) is a Technology Integration

Specialist at a 1:1 iPad school serving 1500 students grades 6-12.