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EDTEC 550
Summer II 2005
Category I - Software Evaluation

NUMBER ONE

Software Title: Inspiration 7.6
Type of Software: Productivity/organization/critical thinking
Subject Area: All
Objectives: Students will use this software to organize ideas
Evaluator: Heather Schilling
Date: 5 July 2005
Description: Inspiration 7.6 is a program designed to enhance 6th through 12th grade students' comprehension through webbing and outlining

The Inspiration 7.6 provides students in grades 6th through 12th grade with a simple way to create a visual diagram or outline. Because these two strategies are important ways in aiding to comprehension, teachers in all content areas will find this program extremely helpful.

While Inspiration 7.6 is a no frills program with no screen directions or great interaction, it does provide users with an easy to follow tutorial or help screen and once a student receives initial instructions by her teacher, she will quickly find the program manageable and easy to use, especially those in high school. Unlike other educational software that is extremely interactive and practices important academic skills, Inspiration 7.6's objectives involve helping students organize their ideas through webbing and outlining and is an excellent educational tool a teacher can use to enhance her teaching.

Because it is a program through which students create individual projects, Inspiration 7.6 does not contain a title sequence nor does it contain sound and video. Instead, the user merely goes to the "file" column and opens a new diagram. She can then click on the kind of diagram or outline she would like to create as well as browse through a large number of images and fonts in order to create her individual project. In a similar way, when the user is finished, she simply clicks on the "save" button or the "print" selection, as well as the "exit" button when finished. Obviously, those students who are familiar with other computer software such as Word, they will find this program equally as easy to use.

As previously stated, Inspiration 7.6 provides users with a variety of images with a variety of choices. In a non-stereotypical way, in the people choices of images, the user can choose from a variety of ethnicities and races as well as even a person in a wheelchair for graphics. What makes this program so beneficial to students is that it allows visual learners to create representations of a variety of topics. For example, after reading a novel, a student may make a plot diagram using this program or a U.S. History student may use it to diagram or outline the major events of the Westward Expansion. The uses for this program are unlimited. Either the teacher can create the web in entirety or she may create a web with blanks for the students to complete. In another use, the teacher can ask students to create the webs as mentioned before. The uses for this program are dynamic which makes this a much needed software package in schools. Furthermore, because the student is in control in entirety, she learns how to manipulate the images to represent her thoughts.

This particular package is designed for middle and high school students, but the company does offer a Kidspiration for younger students. Inspiration 7.6 is extremely appropriate for students in grades six through twelve, and even teachers will find the program useful in planning lessons or creating visual representation of their content area. No matter what content area, math, English,

history, health, art, etc., a teacher can use this program herself or ask students to use the software with great satisfaction. A math teacher can use the web aspect of the program to diagram how a mathematical function breaks down into individual parts or a language arts teacher can use the outline portion of the program to have her students outline a paper or use the webbing aspect to create a character map or story web. Because ISTEP requires students to show their brainstorming session on the writing portion of the test, Inspiration 7.6 will aid in the development of this skill. With a little guidance, even special needs students will find this program helpful. In fact, for those students who have difficulty “seeing” the bigger picture of the writing process or of breaking down story elements, this program will help them visualize what was before rather elusive. While the learning outcomes are not clearly defined for students using the program, it is evident by the setup of the software that students will use graphics to organize their thoughts, examine relationships and ultimately comprehend and retain information.

As an educator, this evaluator learned a great deal about Inspiration 7.6 and was extremely excited to have had the opportunity to evaluate this particular software. In fact, she has already worked on ways to implement this program in her own education classes both as a tool to enhance her own students’ learning, but also as an assignment through which her own students will create a web for a reading activity. Because Inspiration 7.6 applies to so many different situations, all teachers in all content areas can use this program to further their students’ comprehension.

Obviously, the benefits of this program outweigh the negatives. In fact, the evaluator has difficulty identifying any weaknesses. Perhaps, if a weakness must be identified, it would be an added plus if the program implemented sound. For example, if a student could create a voice over for what she had typed on the diagram, it would be icing on the cake. The benefits, however, are great. Not only are there unlimited ways a teacher can use the program, but also the web site provides further assistance to teachers needing other ideas or help. The biggest benefit has been previously mentioned: students can put their ideas into visual representations that will ultimately aid in their comprehension and retention. Using this program is well worth the time for both teachers and students, because it isn’t a drill and skill program; it is a program through which students must make decisions and visual representations of their ideas. They are completely in control of what appears on the screen.

In terms of posing a challenge to students, using this software itself is not challenging, but teachers can tailor the expectations of students’ webs to meet their students’ individual needs. The program can peak students’ curiosity by allowing them complete freedom over their projects. Inspiration 7.6 is worth the teacher’s time, but it will take a little time to introduce the program to students as well as to talk about the importance of outlining and webbing. Once the students have had a short amount of time, twenty minutes even, playing around with the program, they will be able to create simple webs and outlines. The biggest time constraint for the teacher will be in the designing of the lessons for implementing Inspiration 7.6. However, with experience, this evaluator realizes that once the teacher has used Inspiration 7.6 once, she will find implementing the program in other assignments easy.

Inspiration 7.6 is a software package that promotes creativity, discovery, and organization, as well as leads to comprehension and retention of learned material, the software does prepare students for the real-world. In the short term, it prepares them for activities required on the ISTEP; in the long term, it prepares students for organizing ideas and creating visual representations of these ideas. These two skills will lead to productivity.

Overall, Inspiration 7.6 is an excellent program that all teachers can implement in their content areas with great ease. Students will benefit by developing key organizational skills. Not only will students be able to use this program to enhance their skills, but teachers will be able to use it as well, enhancing their teaching.

NUMBER TWO

Software Title:	I Spy Fantasy
Type of Software:	Critical thinking
Subject Area:	All
Objectives:	Students will work on critical thinking and discriminating vision skills
Evaluator:	Heather Schilling
Date:	7 July 2005
Description:	I Spy Fantasy is an interactive software package that provides students with a variety of interesting collages in which they must identify specific objects.

The visually stimulating software entitled I Spy Fantasy is intended for children ages 6 – 10, and most children in this age group will find the program easy to use. As indicated on the label of the game, the purpose of the software is to help children develop critical thinking, and therefore is appropriate for all content areas. After the player signs her name on the guestbook, she can head to different areas in the software. She can rescue a princess by fighting a dragon in a castle, she can fly a rocket ship, or she can search for lost treasures at the bottom of the ocean. This evaluator thinks that it would be an appropriate filler activity for students who finish their work early or as a reward.

While the non-stereotyped software is easy to navigate by merely clicking on the picture, the screen directions are rather vague. In fact, there are no screen directions other than the voice providing the initial directions to locate the objects listed at the bottom of the page, and then the voice that reads the written list below the picture. There are no written directions to follow. By its very nature, the software is interactive. For example, the list of seven to ten objects to locate at the bottom asks the player to locate three flowers, five green bugs, etc. When the child locates one flower, the computer says, “One yellow flower.” Once the object has been located, the word in the list is highlighted.

I Spy Fantasy isn't a fast paced, high action game, but the graphics are beautiful and children will enjoy the challenge of locating difficult to find objects. The pictures are a collage of objects that increase in difficulty as the child masters a level. The voice on the program doesn't vary and there isn't any video, but there is animation. For example, when a correct object is selected, it moves; the snake hisses, the butterfly flaps its wings, and the flower glows. The pictures closely resemble those found in the I Spy books so popular with young children.

The program is easy to use and the user can quickly bypass the beginning of the program by clicking on the title screen and is quickly taken to the guest book. If the child has played before, the game recognizes her and welcomes her back. As well, the player can exit quickly. While the game isn't necessarily flashy, the multimedia is appropriate and well-designed. This evaluator's own children, ages nine and twelve, enjoyed exploring the program, verbalizing it was one of their favorite software programs they had played in awhile. The nine-year-old liked the challenge of locating the required objects. He said, “Some of the things were hard to find, but that made it more fun!” The twelve-year-old appreciated that the pictures increased in difficulty, requiring higher levels of thinking. By the very nature of the collages, the child must critically analyze the picture, looking for hidden objects. Not all objects jump right out at the player. For example, one of the tasks asked the child to find a yellow third. At first, the evaluator looked for the word third or 1/3, but realized after several minutes of searching the screen that the game was asking the player to click on the bowl of beads that was divided into three colors. This obviously requires the player to think critically, realizing that ideas can be represented in different ways.

I Spy Fantasy does not explicitly state its learning outcomes on the program. Instead, the outcomes are implicitly indicated in the heart of the program: searching for objects in collages

leads to visual discrimination and critical thinking, skills students need to succeed in life. As an adult trying out the software, this evaluator did not learn a great deal from the program; in fact, this evaluator found the program rather linear. The only goal of the program was to locate items. In other words, the required task did not change even in the different areas of the program. Whether the player was in the undersea area or the castle, she still only searched for hidden objects. The children who spent three hours interacting with this program over the course of two days, however, enjoyed the challenge and were obviously engaged to spend that amount of time exploring the software.

Because the pictures increase in difficulty, the player does stay motivated. However, as stated before, I Spy Fantasy should not be used as a daily part of the elementary curriculum. Instead, because it does not emphasize a particular academic skill, the program would be a great tool for students who have finished their work early and need an enrichment activity or for a classroom behavior reward. Exceptional students will find I Spy Fantasy equally as inviting. Those who are gifted will find extra challenge in the higher levels of the game, while those who may have difficulty keeping focus on the teacher will find this program engaging. A teacher wouldn't have to spend much time introducing the software, but because I Spy Fantasy promotes discovery and some higher-order thinking, she may want to spend some time discussing with her students how words may not always mean what they first appear to indicate, as pointed out earlier with the "one third" example.

Overall, for those students in the 6-10 age group, their curiosity will be peaked by I Spy Fantasy and as they progress through the various collages, they will be challenged. In an indirect way, the software does prepare students for real-world critical and discriminating thinking. As stated before, the major strengths of the software include promoting higher level thinking skills as well as engaging graphics. The clear pictures with stimulating colors engage players. Furthermore, because the program progressively gets more difficult, this serves as another strength of the I Spy Software.

Unfortunately, though, one of the major weaknesses is the linear characteristic of the software. Instead of asking the student to do a variety of activities, the player performs the same task but at differing levels of difficulty. Finally, it would be helpful to younger children if the directions were repeated several times or were put in print as well at the beginning of the program.

Overall, the I Spy Fantasy serves as an engaging way to work on a child's ability to search for objects and to think critically. It would make an excellent filler activity in any lower elementary classroom and in tandem with the I Spy books.

Number Three

Software Title: Virtual Field Trip of the Grand Canyon
Type of Software: Virtual field trip/web site
Subject Area: Social studies/geography
Objectives: Students will virtually explore the Grand Canyon
Evaluator: Heather Schilling
Date: 11 July 2005
Description: "Into the Canyon" provides teachers with an excellent way to take their students to see one of the Seven Wonders of the World without ever leaving home! This interactive web site is an excellent opportunity for teachers to have their students explore the Grand Canyon on a variety of levels.

"Into the Canyon" is a brilliant and extremely well designed way for teachers to introduce their students to one of the Seven Wonders of the World without ever leaving the comfort of their classrooms. This virtual field trip provides students with an opportunity many will never have the chance to enjoy: a journey into the Grand Canyon. Not only does the teacher have her own area on the web site that provides specific lessons, but also students in grades three through eight have their own area on the site with interactive activities.

If the student or teacher had access to high speed Internet or a networked service, the site is extremely easy to use, switching quickly from one area to the next. This evaluator, however, used her dial up service in her home and had to wait several minutes for video footage or other interactive activities to download. Fortunately, though, most teachers who will use this program will not use dial up service. In all other areas, the program is easy to navigated and students will easily make their way through the different areas in their section: Canyon, Reading the Rocks, Life in the Canyon, Trail Blazers, World Watchers, and Gallery. If a student or teacher wants to skip the very beginning credits, she can click on the appropriate bypass button.

Because the site provides the student with a virtual field trip, the software is interactive in a variety of ways. The user can place her cursor over a picture and the picture changes. Another interesting aspect of the site includes the picture on the banner. If the user moves the cursor to the left or right, the picture serves as a panoramic. In all categories of the student section, multiple activities and sections can be accessed. For example, in the Reading Rocks category a student has the opportunity to watch a video of a geologist discuss the rocks found in the Grand Canyon. In Life in the Canyon, she can play a game in which she must identify different types of plants found in the Grand Canyon. In another section, Trailblazers, a student can see a slide show of different artifacts of people who have inhabited the Grand Canyon for thousands of years. In this same section, a visitor to this virtual field trip can spin a wheel and then guess the answer to the question posed, all of which deal with people who have links to the Grand Canyon. These four examples demonstrate the variety of activities a student can do while on her "field trip," and yet, they barely scratch the surface of what is available.

This evaluator has viewed many educational web sites over the past decade of her professional life and few meet the caliber of "Into the Canyon." This web site is free of stereotypes. In fact, it delicately handles the issue of geological time and how this occurs on the human timeline. It provides artifacts and history of the indigenous people in the past as well as today that inhabit the Grand Canyon. Furthermore, it is written in such a way that young people will understand the content easily. Because it is a web site, a user can easily exit the program, as well as if she wants to return to a different section of the site, she merely needs to look at the toolbar at the top of the page and click the appropriate button.

Social studies teachers in grades three through eighth (and even beyond) will find this web site an excellent use of educational time. In the teacher's section, the web site provides a plethora of detailed lesson plans that mirror the student side of the site. Each lesson plan contains objectives for the lesson, background to the lesson, procedures to follow, evaluation of students and success of the lesson, as well as the academic standards met through the lesson. One of the lessons involved an animal game as well as extension activities that require students to go beyond merely playing a game to check their knowledge of the animals living in the Grand Canyon. In the Human History lesson plan, students create a timeline with pictures they place on a rope. When a teacher incorporates the lesson plans with the web site, all types of learners will be motivated to learn about the Grand Canyon. The evaluator suggests that the teacher buddy struggling learners or struggling readers with those who are stronger readers for the initial tour of the site. Some of the reading is difficult and a student with a learning disability may feel discouraged by the amount of reading. However, this same child will find the interactive portions of the web site quite inviting. Both the teacher and students will find their curiosity peaked with each click of the mouse on the different sections. While the computer controls the information provided, students have the choice of heading in a variety of directions on the site. They also have control of whether they participate in a particular activity or not.

This site's creators obviously have the educational goals of helping students literally see what many will never see, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. If the visitor looks into the background of the web site, she is quickly informed of the program to create virtual field trips through the E3 homepage. While the learning outcomes may not appear to the visitor in a list form as they do on the lesson plans provided in the teacher's section, the learning outcomes are enormous. Students can discover and memorize a variety of facts in different areas of the history, geography, and geology. They can study about people, they can study about plants, they can study about rocks and land formation, they can learn about cultures, and they can learn about natural resources, all through a visit to "Into the Canyon."

As an evaluator, it was difficult to leave this site. In fact, this evaluator wanted to see other virtual field trips produced by Ball State. That was the only weakness found at this site, and it isn't really related to this particular site, but the overseeing site management. When the evaluator tried to access other virtual field trips like the "Into the Canyon," she could not without purchasing an individual password for each field trip. Teachers who wish to share this particular field trip annually may be faced with a similar situation in the future when the "Into the Canyon" becomes part of the archives. The benefits of the site, however, are enormous. Students will find an extremely engaging and well-maintained web site that requires them to think critically and learn important facts about a major landform in their own country. Teachers can also set up viewing the Webcast in their classrooms that could provide students with an even deeper understanding of the content.

This evaluator learned a great deal about virtual field trips by visiting this web site, <http://www.bsu.edu/FieldTrips/canyon/>, but more importantly she learned a great deal about a place in her own country she has never visited. She took the time to play the matching games and take some of the quizzes. She also had fun watching the video footage of how the National Parks benefit the nation and how children can get involved in preserving national landmarks like the Grand Canyon. This particular web site is one that teachers of social studies or geography must bookmark and integrate into their curriculum. The supporting material for teachers aligns with standards and provides teachers the perfect starting point. Overall, this evaluator deems this web site as one of the best she has ever visited.