Special Needs Tech
News

A newsletter celebrating enabling technology, the people who use it, and the developers that make it possible.

EDITOR'S CORNER

Last year I had the opportunity to judge the best K-16 Special Needs Solution category for the Software and Information Industry Association (SIIA) 2003 CODIE Awards. There were only seven products nominated so it wasn't a huge task to review the contenders. Based on last year's experience, I decided that I could manage the task of judging two categories this year and was assigned to judge the Best New Education product category as well as the special needs category for the 2004 CODIES. This turned out to be a much much bigger job as there were over 30 products to review in these two categories. My role as a preliminary round judge was to make my own selection of the five products in each category that I felt should be the finalists. Three other preliminary judges were working to make up their minds on these category contestants as well. It was certainly a lot harder (and more time consuming) this year to pick the top five products. My personal choices are listed in this issue of the newsletter.

Please feel free to make complete copies of this publication to share with others.

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ASSISTIVE TECH EDUCATIONAL CONSULTING

SPECIAL NEEDS TECHNOLOGY INFORMATION, ASSESSMENT, TRAINING AND WRITING SERVICES

Join the ATCanada Listserv

The ATCanada Listserv was initiated on Dec. 30, 2001. Educators and others can join this free discussion group to learn and exchange information on assistive technology issues. Join at: **http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/ATCanada** or **http://ca.geocities.com/janethopkinsbc/**

INSIDE

My Picks For the 2004 SIIA CODIE Awards

I've listed my top five picks in both categories I judged. If you want to see which products are the overall top 5 in all 46 competition categories, go to the 2004 CODIE Awards Web page at http://www.siia.net/codies2004/

For additional information about the phases of this competition and to see which products are the actual overall preliminary round finalists, go to http://www.siia.net/codies2004/

The finalists will be announced on December 17, 2003.

My Picks for

Best Educational Special Needs Solution Category

(1st)***TIENET**

http://www.tiecorp.com

I had the opportunity to participate in the TIENET live demo last year, as it was entered for the 2003 CODIE award. I am still very impressed by the overall value of this product to educators / administrators at all levels.

Strengths: I see this as an all-in-one reporting, management, and information delivery technology to address the complex issues surrounding special education service delivery. It is a very intuitive program, which doesn't require extensive training. It provides readily available access to student data minimizing the workload associated with paper-based documentation that can overwhelm special education staff. This is a powerful efficiency and administrative tool that is capable of standardizing special needs student data collection, while providing customizable reporting capability.

Limitations: I don't see any issues that concern me about this product. In fact, I'm really excited to see that there is translation support included in this technology. That's a unique and valuable feature.

(2nd)**Kurzweil 3000**

http://www.kurzweiledu.com

Kurzweil 3000 software offers top of the line support for literacy challenges.

Strengths: Kurzweil 3000 is a very efficient tool to help educators and students with reading and writing challenges. I found the product was easy to install on my laptop computer and configure with my portable scanner. I could scan and read magazine pages without having to spend time cleaning up the text after the OCR was performed. Kurzweil 3000 provides very good text recognition and document presentation so that users can quickly get to the task of reviewing the content with the screen reading technology. I liked the flexibility of the program as it could be configured to recognize and read white text on a dark background in one of the magazine articles I used. This product provides other great features: Multilingual supports, test-taking features, a very good selection of reference tools to provide excellent vocabulary support. Kurzweil 3000 provides superior functionality to support independent learning.

Limitations: The cost of this product could be a consideration for educators and students who lack the resources to implement the technology. This is just an observation as I am not comparing CODIE nominees according to cost/benefit criteria. I think that Kurzweil 3000 is an outstanding product.

(3rd)*Undisclosed Competitor**

The developer of the product that I selected as the third place contestant required preliminary round judges to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Therefore, I will not name this product, and I make no public comment on this entry.

(4th) LearnStar SC--ESL Module**

http://www.LearnStar.com

The LearnStar SC--ESL Module is a package that promotes interactive student participation and learning through competition style language activities.

Strengths: The key strength of this product is its potential to involve and motivate all learners in a classroom setting. The collaborative nature of this type of activity boosts opportunities for language interaction among participants. The technology allows the teacher to select activities/competitions on various language topic areas. These competitions provide learning about various skills and concepts such as punctuation or literary devices within the context of a vocabulary specific theme activity such as animals, daily living, meeting friends, etc. The activity questions can be displayed in the classroom on a screen or TV

monitor. Students can enter their answers and monitor their progress. Students could work alone or with partners to answer the questions. It lessens the creative load on teachers by adding classroom variety and providing a ready-made learning tool. Teachers can create additional competitions and questions. This program also has reporting capabilities.

Limitations: The initial software set up is a bit confusing for the uninitiated. I suppose there would be quite a few practice games needed before students and teacher had the concept figured out.

(5th)* Failure Free Reading

http://www.failurefreeonline.com

Failure Free Reading provides diagnostic and prescriptive activities for a wide range of reading levels and ages.

Strengths: Web-based delivery with audio and visual media-rich instruction. It provides a very individualized approach to reading skill development. Solid review of vocabulary to support comprehension and word recognition skills is a fundamental part of this program. I like the customizable reporting capabilities for individual students and classes. The clean interface design and accompanying narration makes the program intuitive promoting ease of implementation for students and staff.

Limitations: For optimal performance, this software requires high-speed Internet connections for all computers accessing the program. Although teachers can permit students to access the program on their home computers, a lack of high-speed connectivity will prevent equity of access for all students. Students may become frustrated going through the diagnostic portion of the program. It's a bit lengthy and could challenge some students who lack focus.

My Picks for

Best New Education Solution Category

(1st)*****Sanako Lounge

http://www.sanako.com/lounge100/SanakoLounge100.html

Sanako Lounge 100 provides an enhanced virtual classroom experience for teachers and students in an Internet environment.

Strengths: Wow! Students can be anywhere with a connected computer and take part in lessons that include more interactivity and technology support than would be possible in a traditional classroom. Instructors can support students online with file sharing, Real-Time audio, text, and visual communication. It expands educational possibilities in many ways: distance learning, collaboration with other educational jurisdictions to offer unique courses, involvement of guest speakers from all over the world. What an exciting product.

Limitations: Some may be disturbed by any shift away from face-to-face instruction. However, there is a lot to be gained in many instructional areas with this approach. There would be certain courses/subject areas where this delivery alone would present significant problems. For example, lab / hands-on skill development areas would not be an appropriate match for this instructional medium on its own.

(2nd)****Macromedia Studio MX K-12 Site License Solution

http://www.macromedia.com/buy/volume_license/k12/

Macromedia Studio MX 2004 software (Macromedia Flash MX 2004, Dreamweaver MX 2004, Fireworks MX 2004 and FreeHand MX) and accompanying educational support materials provide substantive Website design curriculum support for educators.

Strengths: I am most impressed with the marketable technology skills value and potential within this curriculum/training package and software. This aspect of the Macromedia Studio MX 2004 educational package makes the product very attractive for both educators and students. Macromedia provides additional access to user support via their Web site. I really like the On Demand Seminars which provide great walk-through orientation with dynamic audio / visual components. I am also impressed with Macromedia's commitment to accessibility and these products' evolving capabilities in addressing e-accessibility needs.

Limitations: The main limitations I see with this product are time factors / training for educators and students to master the basics and complex elements of the software within this package. For beginners, this is very daunting technology. I wouldn't see this as something to be attempted at the elementary or middle school level. It's definitely geared more toward senior to college level students or as an enrichment course for younger students with interest and aptitude in technology. Schools have to be willing to provide the necessary funding / and educator training time and support to ensure successful implementation. The successful

delivery of this curriculum/product depends on a high level of systems and instructor-led commitment. Key staff turnover/loss/absenteeism could result in serious setbacks for the delivery of this program. I may seem to be pointing out a lot of limitations for a top ranked product, however I feel this is very much a curriculum and product that would excite educators and students.

(3rd)***RoboPresenter eLearning Edition

http://www.ehelp.com/products/robopresenter/robopresenter.asp

RoboPresenter eLearning Edition allows educators/trainers to develop PowerPoint enhanced presentations and interactive elearning modules/courses.

Strengths: RoboPresenter installs easily becoming part of the PowerPoint toolbar where it provides additional options for authoring creativity. Some of the RoboPresenter features that can enhance PowerPoint presentations include synchronized audio/narration, Flash technology (without the need to be familiar with Flash), interactive quiz features, insertion of links to online references. Presentations can be delivered via the Web, sent as email attachments, or distributed on CD.

Limitations: The quiz feature seems a bit limited. It would be helpful to have a more complex testing/quizzing tool available in this software.

(4th)**Connected Educator Reading

http://corporate.classroom.com/cer.html

Connected Educator Reading is a Web-based professional development program about the essential components of K-6 reading instruction. This program consists of four courses: two on phonics and two on text comprehension. Each course is made up of 9 to 11 45 minute sessions.

Strengths: This is a visually appealing and easy to access program. I appreciated the transparent overview of course details that were available to the prospective user/purchaser. Model activities, teaching references, and videos are included in this program to extend the learning options and instructional support for educators. The user must score 70% on the completion quiz at the end of each lesson to receive credit. I like the open access provided to users, which allows them to complete lessons in any order they choose. I felt that I could move as quickly through the material as I wanted, but also found plenty of review and support options available to me. I like the interactive design and the ease of implementation. I feel this program is one of the most teacher/user friendly professional development programs I have reviewed.

Limitations: Some users might like a narration feature included with this program.

(5th)*Holt Middle School Math Premier Online Editions

http://www.hrw.com/math/

This is a combination instructional and student progress management Web-based product.

Strengths: The program allows teachers to set up lessons for classes, which students can access online at their own convenience. Web-based multi-platform model provides OS accessibility. I like the great combination of visual and auditory presentation of the lessons, tutorials, examples, etc. Real world examples to illustrate the concept help to reinforce the practical applications of what is being taught.

Limitations: To get the most out of this program and its multimedia features, schools would have to have a high student to computer ratio that would allow students the time needed to complete the work. It could be difficult to provide widespread access to this type of computer-based instruction in schools with inadequate technology funding and numerous students without Internet access at home. It seems to be a product for the well-funded technology-rich classroom or as part of a virtual school/distance learning program.

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Happy Holidays