



## Are Free Tools Worth the Price?

### Yes

The affordances of free Web 2.0 applications far outweigh the costs in time and frustration that may result from their bugs or inflexibility. As with any technology tool, free or for cost, the key is tapping into their potential for powerful educational innovation and finding creative solutions to work around the bugs.

This debate dredges up a slew of old, familiar adages: “you get what you pay for”—and these tools are free. Or “time is money”—and often it takes a considerable investment of time to work through the pitfalls. Admittedly, we aren’t dealing with perfection here. But in what alternative world do bug-free

technological tools exist? How often have we invested a large share of our budgets in an application that didn’t come with some snags and inflexibility?

As we fight to evolve our classrooms and schools, we often run smack into budget cuts or rising costs of equipment for which there is no free replacement.



**Jennifer Vermillion**

### No

Free tools may not be worth the price if they require rewriting curricula. The current culture of education and proliferation of free online applications is causing a shift in the world of educational technology. I have concerns over teachers’ willingness to completely revamp curricula because an application is free. I love some of the online tools and have had fun playing with them. I have even shared a few on my blog. However, I realize they might not be around tomorrow, many of them are one-hit wonders, and using them essentially makes the user the beta tester.

Changing and revamping curricula is ill advised due to the unpredictability of the length of time the applications will be available. Many new Web sites feature incredible software as a beta test and later release the application on a cost basis. A recent example would be Jott, a voice-to-text transcription service.

What is worse is not knowing which Web sites will



**Terry Shay**

Not only can we supplement our educational technology arsenal with free workable tools, be it at the district, school, or classroom level, we are obligated to do so. By supporting free Web 2.0 applications, we ensure their continued survival. These tools help bridge the divide between schools with large technology budgets and schools struggling to stay afloat in an increasingly digital world. These tools, in essence, level the playing field for students who may not otherwise have access to course management systems or digital authoring tools, to name a few.

In our PK–12 school, we are energized by the possibilities that these free tools provide. Because adopting them does not require our faculty to enter into a formal and lengthy adoption process, these tools often provide the much-needed “just in time” solution or fuel the spontaneous energy of colleagues collaborating on a project.

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We rely on free Web 2.0 tools to customize course management systems, provide a safe and secure online video library of student work, and strengthen assessment with comprehensive electronic portfolios. We rely on free Web 2.0 applications to differentiate learning, strengthen professional development by engaging with each other in our own personalized social learning community, and deepen our connections with classrooms across the country and around the world.

Sure, we’ve run into the snags that accompany these tools, and we’ve asked ourselves on many occasions if the “cost” was worth the benefit. Each and every time we hit a snag, we are afforded the opportunity to model

effective problem-defining and creative solution development for our students and for each other. In other words, the answer is unequivocally “yes.”

Sure, one could justify investing several thousand dollars in a program for which there is a free comparable tool, but imagine what a school or district could do with the dollars saved by an investment in these free Web 2.0 applications. What would you do with an extra \$10,000 in your budget?

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remain available. We have all found great Web sites only to find them gone when we try to retrieve them later. Rewriting curricula is an expensive and time-consuming process. Having to do so because an application is no longer available results in unnecessary spending.

Many of the free programs are one-hit wonders. Wordle, for example, is a fun application, which I played with and blogged about. Using a story I had written for a class, I made a beautiful piece of art. While I could see it in a classroom fulfilling the same purpose, there is no depth to the application. Compared to a program that has multiple uses, the appeal is limited.

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use them in our classrooms on a permanent basis.

Technology integration has its challenges. When there is a malfunction, only experienced technology integrators continue to use the tools. Turning off early adopters with applications that do not work is too high a price to pay for any technology. In addition, most classes cannot afford the time to struggle with software that is not fully functional.

Writing about free software makes me wonder if educators would be as enthusiastic to change curricula if the programs were commercial products? Is the proliferation of free software an indicator of the sad state of affairs

in school budgeting? If what makes it good is based on the fact that it is free, perhaps some rethinking is necessary.

I want to be able to buy software that does many things in my classroom, has been developed with the highest standards of content, and is sustainable for the long haul. I do not care to develop new curricula based on an application that does not live up to those three criteria.

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