



# FORGET ABOUT THE PRICE TAG?

⬇️ OPEN SOURCE SOFTWARE IS FREE, FLEXIBLE, AND DRIVEN BY PASSIONATE COLLABORATION – SO HOW CAN SCHOOLS USE IT TO HELP MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS? IAN SKEELS OUTLINES SOME OF THE WAYS...



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ian Skeels is the managing director of Point2Educate, whose Point2School service ([www.point2school.com](http://www.point2school.com)) offers a wide range of curriculum software and online services for rental and subscription. In addition, Point2School's service includes many of the top open source software titles used in schools, together with free online resources and support.

**I**CT Progress', a term that signifies advancement, development and improvement, is generally welcomed with open arms, but how high is the price for this progression in education? Aside from the huge financial implications of staffing costs and renovations to a school's building, ICT is seen as the next biggest drain on a school's budget. So, when savings need to be made, it is hardly surprising that equipment expenditure and software spending is scrutinised. However, with the ever present role of technology as a teaching and learning tool, schools need to ensure they make savings without putting pupils' education at a disadvantage, particularly with some of the fastest growing and highest paying jobs in the UK now in the technology sector.

One way for schools to make savings and still offer a wide variety of ICT educational tools is through open source software. This is community-driven software with its source code made available to all. It involves a license in which the copyright holder provides the rights to use, amend, and share the software at no cost and for any purpose. Freely available online and covering several requirements in the national curriculum, it makes sense for schools to maximise the use of open source software to save money. In fact, many higher education institutions are ahead of the game as a recent article by the Guardian's Higher Education Network explains, "There are clear cost savings available to adopting open source solutions. The University of London Computer Centre hosts Moodle for 2 million students across 150 UK higher and further education providers, many of whom have migrated from a closed source solution. While it can be hard to quantify exact savings as many contracts prevent institutions discussing the price they pay, Richard Maccabee, director at ULCC tells us that they "can reach six figures over the average contract term of 3 years for a typical university"." These same savings can apply for schools; but there are other advantages, too:

■ **Flexibility:** Software is usually sold on an 'as-is' basis – in other words, if for whatever reason you are dissatisfied with the product, there's little you can do about it. Open source software offers great flexibility and provides

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healthy competition that challenges proprietary software companies to innovate in new and different ways; this is important for schools who want to keep ahead of engaging and up to date software titles for their students. Brad Smith, Microsoft's Executive Vice President and General Counsel sees this as a vital consideration for companies. "We at Microsoft respect and appreciate the passion and the great contribution that open source developers make in our industry," he observes. "We respect and we appreciate the important role that open source software plays for our customers, who almost always have heterogeneous computer networks with software and hardware and services that, as you all well know, come from multiple vendors." In addition, users have permission to change open source software or add and remove features. Even if a teacher doesn't necessarily have the computing fluency to make these changes, he or she does have permission to get other people to make them. Also, consider the fact that users are able to make copies of their changed software and install these wherever needed, something that plug and play software titles rarely allow. Users need only comply with some simple requirements to be able to widely distribute new copies of the software. As Naace's community points out, "Being able to give students CD-ROMs or memory sticks with copies of all the software used in schools is tremendously liberating."

● **Continuity:** It is possible for a proprietary software company to shut down or discontinue its services for software it produces, and when this happens, the support and the future of the software ends too. This can be incredibly costly for schools, leaving them in the lurch with software they can no longer use to its full capability. Open source software is not dependent on a single entity; any developer is able to pick up where someone else left off and continue improving the software.

● **Security:** Secure and safe educational content and resources are paramount for schools. As Katherine Noyes, writer for PC World magazine points out, "With closed source software, you have nothing but the vendor's claims telling you that they're keeping the software secure and adhering to standards... The visibility of the code behind open source software, however, means you can see for yourself and be confident." The more people can see and test a set of code, the more likely it is that any errors will be caught and promptly fixed.

● **Levelling the playing field:** Unfortunately, not every student has home access to high-end computers running the

latest software. As more and more schools begin to address the rigorous requirements of the new computing curriculum and bring parental support into the mix, students from lower income families are in danger of being disadvantaged. Many open source software titles are able to run on lower end machines with little difficulty, introducing a level of equality that can help address disparity.

## SO, WHAT'S THE CATCH?

Anything that is given away for free will inevitably attract scepticism. Critics of open source software often say that it is more complicated than ready-made software and can take longer to use, so any cost saving is negated by the time it takes to get it to the stage that it truly benefits the user. However, with today's generation of digital natives, it is highly conceivable that students will work with their peers as programmers to create resource that are of relevance to them in supporting their development and learning.

Other detractors also argue there may be complexity of navigating the software, confusing users. As Dennis McCafferty, writer for CIO Insight points out, "Because parallel developments are ongoing, users may not know which version does what or whether it's compatible with other software on their proprietary platform." However, there are many open source software titles that come with technical support and guidance.

Some education content providers are committed to making free resources available to schools alongside their other paid for resources. Point2School, for example, offers software titles on a rental and subscription basis and a vast selection of free open source software. This includes the Naace Computing Toolkit, which contains full documentation, continuing professional development (CPD), open source software, free online resources and supportive teaching community tools. In addition, the Microsoft Learning Suite of innovative tools and resources for schools is also offered and all of this content is entirely free to use too.

As in so many cases, I suspect that using a combination of both options is perhaps the best approach for schools, and I'm not alone in thinking this. Andrew Miller, an independent journalist writes, "Schools could make significant savings by using open source, but this also requires a significant investment of time, research and training. Using a combination of both commercial and open source... can help to reduce costs while still giving students a choice. That's got to be good news for any school's report card."