



The iPad fad – more substance than hype?

Many commentators were stumped by the iPad when it appeared last year. Was it a large smartphone? An underpowered laptop? They decided it was a device nobody really needed. On closer investigation, **Sarah Jones** might not agree

At first, I wasn't sure about the iPad either. I'd seen tablets before, and I hadn't been blown away. However, this is a tablet that works, and it has huge potential for education. There are three features that set it apart from the competition.

Fit for purpose

First, the iPad is robust and portable. It's light and slight, and the battery life is longer than a school day. It's easy to pass around and share what's on the screen. The iPad's scale is good for children.

Sensory strengths

Second, the iPad is connected to our physical world through its touchscreen and built-in accelerometer and global position system (GPS).

Touch – tapping, swiping, dragging and pinching – is a highly intuitive way to control the iPad's operations. Different touches mean different things: one finger swiping is different from two fingers rotating, and two fingers pinching means something else again.

Touch is a very personal way to interact with technology. It's magic to play the screen with your fingers to make music using MorphWiz, a performance-level instrument for the iPad. Notes travel from low to high across the screen, but you can also morph sounds from one timbre to another by dragging your finger vertically.

If you tilt the iPad, you'll tweak the sound of MorphWiz's synthesizer. This is the iPad's accelerometer responding to motion and orientation. Apps can also use data captured by the GPS such as location, distance, elevation, direction or speed. The Star Walk astral telescope app adapts its view of the sky to wherever the user is holding it up, highlighting planets and constellations.

The applications

You can mind map, create a comic or rotate elements on the periodic table thanks to the third feature exclusive to the iPad – the applications. Around 65,000 apps can be accessed through Apple's iTunes store, and they cost a fraction of the price of desktop software (the ones I've mentioned range from no cost to US\$9.99).

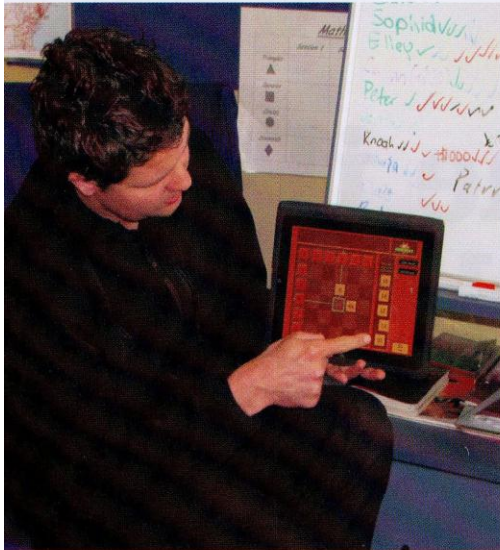
The best apps do a small number of things extremely well – like the beautifully designed Intro to Letters app, which helps children to trace, read, write and pronounce letters

The best apps do a small number of things extremely well. Like the beautifully designed Intro to Letters app, which helps children to trace, read, write and pronounce letters.

The Brushes app extends a budding painter's

ABOVE: iPads are light and slight, and the battery life is longer than a school day. The scale is good for children

TECHNOLOGY



CREDIT: INTERFACE Magazine, www.interfaceonline.co.nz



ABOVE: iPads have been a huge hit at Grant's Braes School, Dunedin. ICT lead teacher Craig Kemp bought a pod of five iPads last year, and they've proved hugely popular with students. "They've been so successful in engaging even the most reluctant learner that we're looking at ways to get them into every classroom." Check out Craig's class wiki at weareroom1.wikispaces.com, and the school website www.grantsbraes.school.nz.



◀ repertoire by providing a range of hard or soft-edged round brushes to brushes made of dots, lines and splotches. There's an option to vary each brush in size and opacity depending on how fast you paint with it.

With the release of the iPad 2, iMovie and Garageband join iWork (word processor, spreadsheet and presentation software) in being adapted for the touchscreen. The new iPad also comes with cameras for video conferencing, Skype and photography.

Left out or ahead of its time?

Apple pushes ahead by leaving a few things behind. Time in the classroom will determine whether these omissions are things we still need or won't miss.

Flash won't work on the iPad, so Flash-based websites can't be viewed. Flash is on the way out, and I guess Apple wants us to get over it. Also, many open-source apps aren't available for the iPad.

The iPad will print to only a handful of printers, which would be limiting in a classroom if a more permanent record of work is required, although I'm picking that our need to print will diminish too.

It's a personal rather than multi-user device. There are no profiles, no multiple logins; settings are for one user only. Does this mean one computer per child? Or is this a device that's truly for sharing?

Disk space is at a premium. Apple's assumption is that the user is online much of the time and storing most of their data on the web. This kind

of connectivity is aspirational for many schools.

Some commentators have pointed out that the tablet's strengths lie in consuming rather than creating media. The iPad's not for writing long documents or projects requiring specialist software and major processing power. However, at early childhood and primary level, the scope of the creative applications looks promising.

Demand from schools for the new iPad is huge, says John Dunbar, from Edtech, an Apple education specialist. "In part, it's because of better connectivity between this iPad and projectors and large screens. It makes whole-class participation and demonstration of apps far easier, which can only extend teaching and learning possibilities with the iPad."

The post-PC era

Talking to journalists last year, Apple CEO Steve Jobs said: "When we were an agrarian nation, all cars were trucks. But as people moved more towards urban centres, people started to get into cars. I think PCs are going to be like trucks. Less people will need them."

Apple describes the iPad as a post-PC device. Far from a device that nobody needs, the iPad signals the future of how we will interact with technology. Tablets like this won't be the only type of computing device in schools, but they may well become the dominant one. Schools with the connectivity, funding and sympathy for Apple's direction should be considering them now. ■