

**WHO IS
BEHIND THE
TOOL?**

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IT Tools Education

There is an increasing call for the use of digital teaching and learning materials, and also respective IT tools in education – ranging from early childhood, school and university, to adult education.

Many of these offers and tools are rolled out by sometimes entirely new (such as EdTech start-ups) and often economically motivated actors. Thus, some of these suppliers focus on their commercial interests or the mere technical feasibility rather than on the pedagogical usefulness of their systems.

As a user of such digital teaching and learning systems, it is therefore worthwhile to closely scrutinise every new IT tool, app and so-called “learning package” in order to make informed decisions on whether or not it can be applied in a pedagogically sound manner.

Useful or not?

The following steps can help to gain a first overview of the system and the actors behind it:

- Check the imprint on the supplier’s website,
- Read pages such as “Who we are” or “About”,
- Look out for partner organisations or sponsors of the supplier (often on the bottom of the website),
- Research in what other contexts key people of the company/organisation (such as directors, managers, staff, etc.) appear, are active or have networks.

Example: Digital Literacy Lab

The Digital Literacy Lab (<https://dl-lab.org/>) advertises with free digital teaching material about “education for a sustainable development”. A glance on the Lab’s cooperation partners shows that this is a joint project by the “Education Innovation Lab”, “Junge Tüftler” and the “TüftelAkademie” – three organisations whose goal it is to “bring digitisation into the schools as an interdisciplinary topic” (own translation). What is interesting but not immediately apparent: the Education Innovation Lab lists Google as one of their partners. The TüftelAkademie cooperates with, among others, the Fraunhofer Institute for Intelligent Analysis and Information Systems (IAIS), Google (“Open Roberta”), and with “Calliope mini” (a single-board computer that was distributed to primary schools, sometimes for free, and that is intended to teach children programming skills – supported by Google, SAP and BOSCH). Finally, Junge Tüftler – which was honoured as a flagship project by the “Google.org Impact Challenge 2018” – cooperates with the Bitkom initiative “erlebe IT”, also with “Calliope mini” and “Open Roberta”, and has been training teachers together with the Vodafone Foundation Germany in the context of the “Coding for Tomorrow” project since 2017.

Open questions

The Digital Literacy Lab promotes its work using terms like sustainability and digital literacy. Nevertheless, neither questions about resource consumption through using digital technologies nor a critical reflection of, for example, data streams can be found in its programme. Do these and similar questions – deliberately or unconsciously – remain unanswered because the answers might not be in line with the economic interests of some cooperation partners who are interested in marketing their digital systems without disturbances? Cooperation between pedagogical initiatives and commercial suppliers needs to be confronted with calls for transparency. Decision-making processes in such projects / initiatives are often not apparent, frequently informal and driven by hidden interests. Moreover, control over the users’ data is sometimes unclear and the commercial processing of these data can be a part of the business model of third parties – and therefore of the cooperation.

Questions

- Who is the software supplier (non-profit, for-profit, governmental, private, established, new, etc.)?
- Who does the supplier cooperate with? Are there any connections to IT businesses / specific companies (partners, overlap in staff, etc.)?
- Does such cooperation have any consequences on the learning / teaching contents, data security, agenda or understanding of education by the supplier / the IT tool?
- Is it likely that the supplier still exists in 2, 5 or 10 years from now (e.g. learning platform, administrative software, etc.)?
- Is there sufficient support / contact persons / information?
- Does the supplier have pedagogical expertise (rather than merely technological)?
- What alternatives exist (established, open source, analogue, cheaper / free)?

Literature and References

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UNBLACK THE BOX is a network initiative founded in 2019 by researchers from education science, sociology, information technology, media and health education, as well as teachers in schools, universities and pedagogical training. Our goal is to enable educational institutions and teachers to respond to the growing datafication and digitization of education with enlightened, critical and conscious decision-making, even without extensive IT knowledge.

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