

## Curating the World of Educational Apps

With a bank of 40,000 educational apps that have been cataloged, reviewed, and approved, a Tennessee initiative hopes to make it easier for educators to use apps in the classroom and beyond.

- By [Toni Fuhrman](#)
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Sometimes, finding the right app can feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. Between Apple and Android, the number of apps available for download has surpassed one million. If you're an educator looking to utilize these apps in the classroom, the search can be even tougher: According to a recent ranking of how apps are used, gaming comes first and educational usage is not even listed.

For faculty who see the potential for mobile devices in education, this is a wasted opportunity. After all, the [National Education Association](#) estimates that "smartphones and, to a lesser extent tablets like the iPad, will be in the hands of every student in the United States within five years."

Robbie Melton, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the [Tennessee Board of Regents](#) (TBR), decided she could not let such potential slip away. Three years ago, she created the [TBR eLearning Initiative](#), a central resource to assist educators looking for mobile apps to facilitate the learning process.

"I was sitting at a meeting, and looking at people texting, playing games, and searching the internet," she recalls. "When I asked the participants what they had on their devices in terms of education, they all said the same thing: nothing. Then I went to the publishers, who said the devices were not built for that." So, Melton started visiting websites, looking for apps. If the app was educational, she put it in an app bank.

In the three years since, the app bank has compiled an impressive selection of 40,000 educational apps. In addition, the TBR eLearning Initiative has developed a roster of volunteers who connect educators with the app world, and assist them in identifying apps for teaching, learning, workforce, and professional development.

In her search for like-minded colleagues, Melton has a big pool from which to draw: TBR consists of 45 institutions with a combined enrollment of more than 190,000 students, including six state universities, 13 community colleges, and 26 technology centers.

The app bank is not a dumping ground for apps that may have educational value. The collection of apps is actually *curated*, making it easier for educators to find and evaluate apps.

The curation process involves the following:

- App-review teams that evaluate mobile apps for teaching and learning
- Quality-control standards for using mobile devices and apps in education and business
- A set of common standards, developed by system librarians, to categorize apps
- A collection of data, case studies, and materials about how apps have been used in the classroom
- A central unit to purchase the latest mobile devices and apps for testing by faculty and staff

Today, a volunteer team of 62 faculty and staff members in various disciplines reviews mobile apps, selecting those that meet quality standards and have significant potential for enhancing teaching and learning. In addition, the faculty and staff of [Walters State Community College](#) (TN) pilot the apps for teaching and learning effectiveness.

"Each app is tested to make sure it stands up to its claims, and meets specified standards for use in education and in the workforce," notes Melton. In addition, apps are tagged, since there is no national categorization system comparable to the Dewey Decimal System.

TBR eLearning has also partnered with [Merlot](#), an online community of resources for higher education, to create a peer-review team to assess mobile apps. On the TBR eLearning home page, a link allows educators to submit apps to the TBR and Merlot reviewers.

### **The Faculty Perspective**

For educators looking for appropriate apps to use themselves, a widget on the homepage performs searches by title, app use, device type, subject, educational level, publisher, and cost.

Marc Burnett, vice president for student affairs at [Tennessee Tech University](#), believes the service offered by TBR eLearning is "invaluable," after finding Sign for Me, an app for the hearing impaired that acts as a virtual interpreter. "This app and others like it could eventually save universities and their students thousands of dollars," says Burnett. "We currently pay interpreters about \$30,000 a year."

In addition, notes Burnett, "TBR has established quality standards for apps, as they must meet ADA standards, be content- and age-appropriate, and provide access for all students."

Mary Martin, professor in the department of mathematical sciences at [Middle Tennessee State University](#), has found a range of useful apps through the TBR app bank, including MyCalculator, Wolfram Alpha, Math Terms, and Instapaper. The app bank's importance will increase, she notes, when the school implements its own campus cloud shortly.

"There is some discussion on our campus regarding universal on-campus use of a standard technological object--iPad, laptop, whatever--that might be preloaded," she says. For this and general educational apps, says Martin, "I'm finding the TBR eLearning Initiative to be tremendously helpful."

While the app bank falls under the auspices of the Tennessee Board of Regents, Melton is quick to point out that it's a resource for educators everywhere. "Educators can go to one place to find apps--simply by describing what they would like to do, what device they would like to use, and what educational and workforce needs they want to address," she concludes. "I created this resource center so that educators across the globe could easily find apps in their areas of interest."

### **Campus Technology**

#### About the Author

Toni Fuhrman is a writer and creative consultant based in Los Angeles.