

# A is for App

- ✦ As smart-phones and handheld computers move into classrooms worldwide, we may be witnessing the start of an educational revolution. Can technology unleash childhood creativity and transform the roll of the teacher?
- ✦ by Anya Kamenetz with photographs by Danielle Levitt - *Fast Company Magazine*, April 2010, pp. 66-77.

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# The Singer Twins

- ◆ When they were 6-months old, the sisters preferred their cell phones to other toys. At three they use their iPhones to learn how to read with an app called First Words. They also use mom's computer to edit photos. They belong to a generation that has never known a world without ubiquitous handheld and networked technology. (Doug: This makes them second generation digital natives as opposed to the first generation that never knew life without personal computers.) This article also includes pictures and quotes from other children who range in age from 3 to 10.

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# Mobil Adoption

- ◆ The adoption of mobil devices is happening faster worldwide than that of color TV a half-century ago. Mobil phone subscribers are expected to hit 5 billion during 2010; more than 2 billion of those live in developing countries, with the fastest growth in Africa. Mobil broadband is forecast to top access from desktop computers within five years.

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# Effect on Children?

- ◆ As with television, people are wondering about the new technology's effect on children. While TV is largely a passive medium with lots of junk and a little *Sesame Street*, networked handheld devices are tools for expression and connection. New studies and pilot projects show smartphones can make kids smarter. Major foundations are zeroing in on handhelds for preschool and primary grades. Many new mobiles including ever shrinking computers have come into schools in the past year. Systemic, bureaucratic, and cultural barriers are in the way, but the children are ready.

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# Enter TeacherMate

- ✦ The TeacherMate is a handheld that contains educational activities that match reading and math curricula in the schools where they are used. Each week a child's TeacherMate is synced with the teacher's computer so the teacher knows each child's exact skills, levels, and time and can make assignments for the following week. The kids get a sense of freedom and it doesn't seem like work. While kids use the handhelds, the teacher can give attention to individuals or groups suggested by TeacherMate data.

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# More on TeacherMate

- ✦ In September of 2009, TeacherMate expanded from 12 pilot schools in Chicago to 500 schools in 14 states. It can allow a teacher to track exactly how much reading a child does at home and it can allow a math whiz to speed ahead several grade levels. There is a Spanish edition and other languages are in the works. It is the brainchild of Seth Weinburger, who sees it soon migrating to other handhelds. What matters to him is the development of new teaching and learning practices built around the idea of affordable, portable machines paired with constantly updated software.

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# TeacherMate in the Third World

- ✦ Paul Kim, the CTO of Stanford's School of Education, is field testing TeacherMates in rural Mexico. "In places with no TV, no Internet, and no books, these are like gifts from heaven...For these kids it can be a ***complete pocket school***. It's much better than giving books, which they can't read." Kim sees the devices as a way for the kids to teach themselves. "The more you expect from a kid, the smarter they are going to get." "A kid can pick up this device and learn it in a few minutes, the teachers need two hours." "Why does education need to be so structured? What are we so afraid of?"

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# The Roll of Mobil Phones

- ✦ Mobil phones used offline have virtually the same features as TeacherMate - screen, speaker, mic, and buttons. It is also clear that mobil phones will continue to be more iPhone-like in the not too distant future. The history of technology, which goes way back, is full of graveyards. Now can be different according to Richard Rowe, founder and leader of the Open Learning Exchange.

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# The Skeptics

- ✦ Skeptics include those who think we should start with paper, pencil, and chalkboards and those who are wary about the motives of cell-phone makers and telecom service providers, who would reap a windfall should governments embrace mobil learning. Cell-phones are a way for advertisers to target children. They also threaten the educational status quo. The main transformational change that needs to happen is for the teachers to transform from the purveyors of information to coaches.

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# Kim's Conclusion

- ✦ According to Kim, the challenge is putting student-centered and student-empowered ideas into practice. When you see a child eagerly embracing a device that lets her write, draw, figure out math, and eventually find the answer to any question she might ask, it's hard not to feel the excitement of the moment, or its revolutionary potential. We can leap frog massive infrastructure limitations to unleash the only real renewable resource - the inventive spark of 1 billion children. They're creative no matter where they are.

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