Educational Software Cooperative (ESC)

(Website review)

Reviewer:
Ignacio Aedo
Associate Professor
Laboratorio DEI
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain
aedo@ia.uc3m.es
http://peterpan.uc3m.es

Site URL:
http://www.edu-soft.org/

Site title:
Educational Software Cooperative (ESC)

Site objective and audience:
ESC (Educational Software Cooperative) web site is oriented towards helping people involved in the use and development of educational software.

The objective of this site is, as it is stated in the FAQ page, "to advance the mutual benefit of authors, publishers, dealers and distributors of educational software; to voluntarily cooperate formally and informally with each other to better develop, advertise, distribute and sell our educational software; to provide the public with information regarding the benefits, uses, and availability of educational software". To reach this goal, this web site provides people interested in educational software with the possibility of downloading free software developed by the different organisations that make up this non-profit association. Other interesting services are the links to ESC organisations, an educational ring of organisations and companies related to education which can be visited in different ways (sequential guided tour, freely, randomly) and a message board which is mainly used to ask for specific software.

Considering the current contents and services, ECS web site does not fulfil all its objectives. Although it offers a platform to advertise and distribute educational software products, no information is provided about the utility, benefits and uses of such products.

Domain related aspects:
Software supplied by ESC does not belong to a particular theme and it includes software concerning 27 different areas not all related to education (e.g. screen savers and utilities). The number of items of each area ranges from 1 to 17. Most software is related to primary and secondary school courses, although the message board can be used to ask for more specific applications.

The site content can not be considered as complete at this moment, but it offers an interesting platform to introduce educational software that can be tested in realistic environments.

ESC site contains a page called "Information and links" which includes only two advertising banners. There are many web sites of organisations, companies and universities that are working on educational software. Links to such resources would increase the utility of the ECS site.

Concerning the educational value of this web site, no information is provided about the quality and utility of products and which is the experience of those that used them, which is more important than having the possibility of downloading software that at the end could be useless. The message board could have been an ideal environment to provide such information. Moreover, the educational value of each product could have also be linked to the description of the product itself, so that users could benefit from the feedback of previous testers instead of just arbitrarily download software, test it in their specific environment and hold their experience for themselves.

Connectivity:

ESC site is easily accesible and there are no constraints to reach its information. Moreover there is a text version to speed up the access of users who do not have a very powerful platform. No additional software is required.

Interface related aspects:

The interface is in general readable albeit it is not consistent, what can make the system difficult to learn and remember. Options of the home page do not have the same background, which seems to be used arbitrarily. It is not clear why they use sometimes a white background, others a yellow or a white notebook. In addition, there is a navigation tool to access all the options of the home page but it appears in different locations depending on the page which is being visited. Sometimes it is on the upper left area and other times it appears on the bottom and centered. This inconsistency can produce user's errors when trying to find this navigation tool, particularly if the first page visited has the options on the upper side and the next one has them on the bottom (in most cases the navigation tool is not visible when opening the page and you have to scroll down till you see it).

The other navigation aid supported by this web site is supposed to be a site map but it only provides a hierarchical list of topics. A real map giving a visual representation of how information is organised could be more useful than a flat list.

Concerning the search facilities supported by this site, it provides several textual indexes where items are ordered according to a particular criterion (alphabetical, geographical, etc.). More powerful search mechanism could be provided using a database and forms to write queries that could adapt better to the user needs than just navigating through a number of fixed indexes. Taking into account that the main function of this web site is to provide access to a number of software products, if the searching mechanism is improved to allow user queries the site utility will get much better.

Overall issues:

This site is maintained by a nonprofit organisation called Educational Software Cooperative (ESC), which is composed by users, educators, developers, publishers and distributors of educational software. It is clear how to contact the owner (info@edu-soft.org) and there is no information neither any clue about the site update frequency.

Final opinion:

I think it is a good idea to have a repository of educational shareware, since it could simplify the work of many educators who are trying to reinvent the wheel. However, to achieve this goal using the ECS site, educators will miss information about the shareware, including experiences and suggestions from other people who have used the software in real life situations. What most educators really need is not only to have software but also to know how to use it to improve the learning process of their students. Thus, they can profit from sharing not only the software but also a know-how. The site would have been covered with an educational value if each product had been accompanied with information about the context in which it can be useful (for which kind of courses and students) and which problems can arise when using it. Indeed, the organisation objective of "providing the public with information regarding the benefits, uses, and availability of educational software" is not achieved at this moment. Other minor aspects which should be improved to make the system useful are the searching mechanisms and the interface.