

PRICE

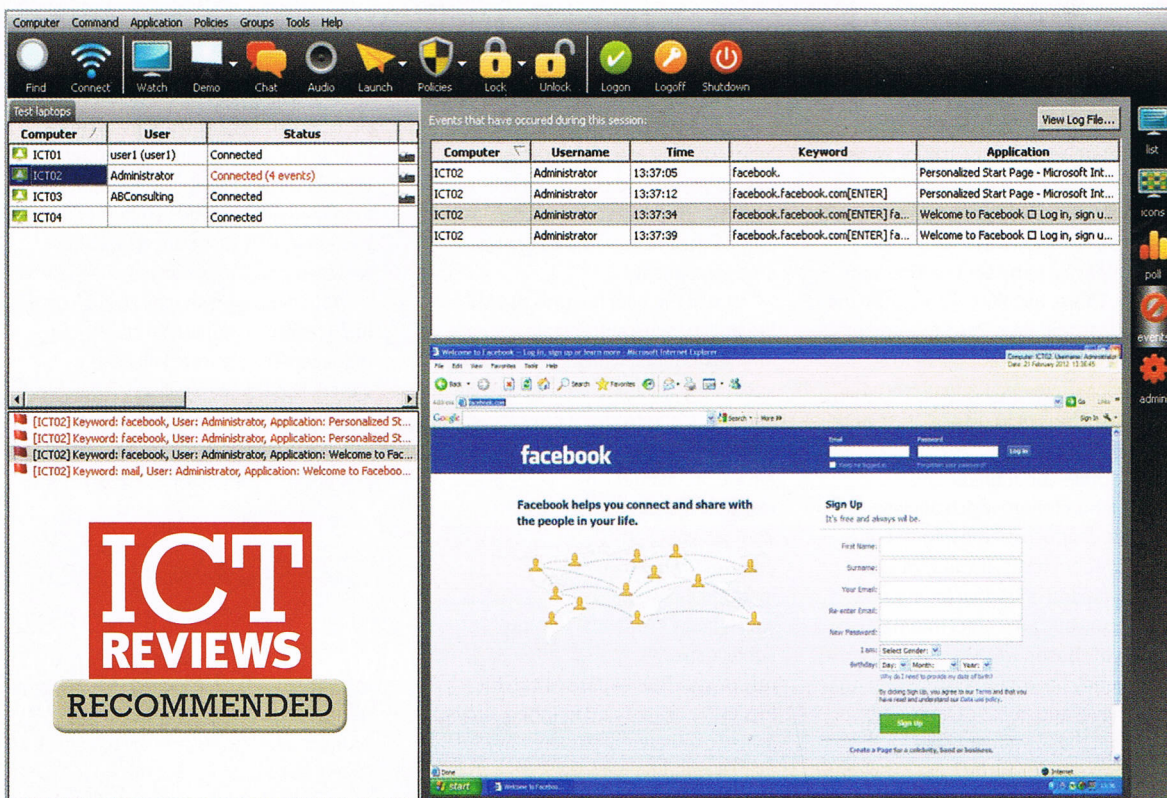
Per teacher client,
£175 to £250
exc VAT

SUPPLIER

www.abtutor.com

REQUIREMENTS

Windows XP to
Windows 7; Mac
OS X 10.5 to 10.8;
Apple iOS 4 and
above



AB Tutor 7.2

Cross-platform monitoring capabilities at a competitive price mean this CMS can't be beaten for value

AB Tutor might be the budget option here, but it delivers more than just excellent value for money. The latest version includes a good selection of features for cross-platform monitoring – covering Windows, Mac and iOS operating systems – along with screen broadcast to students (with the ability to lock students or record the teacher presentation) and the ability to display student screens to the rest of the room.

The monitoring software can identify and log all programs running on the student's computer, even down to the keystroke level when watching students' keyboard input. If you need to collect evidence of wrongdoing, there's an easily accessible screenshot feature, or you can take a video of their screen for playback later.

As a teacher you have full remote control of student stations, including the mouse and keyboard and their installed applications. You can blank student screens to ensure you have their full

attention when presenting at the front. What's more, the class management facilities cover everything from remote shutdown and restart to blocking access to the printer.

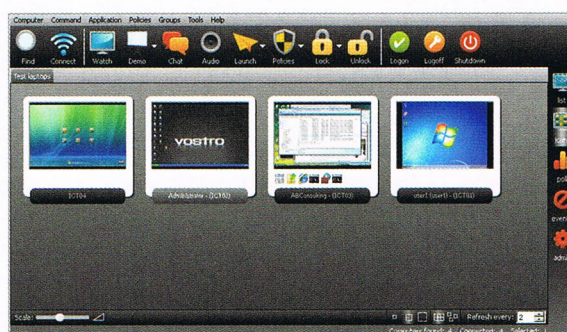
Classes can be created, and you can apply different control policies to different groups, allowing you to grade your level of control according to the needs of the student. If you're concerned about losing connections, the software will automatically relocate the student if there's a network interruption. Using the internet tools, you can manage students' internet

availability per class, or blacklist certain sites for a period of time. Greater control can be achieved through the ability to restrict the keywords used, and it's possible to set alerts should class members visit specific sites.

AB Tutor's focus isn't only monitoring and control. It also supports the ability to poll questions to the group, gathering the results in real-time, and it's an effective solution for file distribution and collection, too.

The interface is minimal to the point of being simplistic, but the clear titles and icons make it easier to find your way around. The software is maintained automatically with software upgrades, and this is pushed to the student client as well. Security is another strength, with passwords protected by 128-bit encryption.

There's a fully functional 30-day trial available, alongside an iOS teacher assistant client too. Finally, the pricing structure is very reasonable: you pay for the teacher client software only, and all the student client installs are free. Other solutions might offer more advanced features or a slightly slicker interface, but when it comes to sheer value for money, AB Tutor is difficult to beat.



AB Tutor balances detailed monitoring with real control in an easy-to-use classroom management software package

EASE OF USE

★★★★★

FEATURES

★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

★★★★★

OVERALL

★★★★★

Buyer's guide to Classroom Management Software

THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM GIVES STUDENTS OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN – BUT ALSO PLENTY OF ROOM FOR MISCHIEF. **ANDREW DIXON** LOOKS AT SIX SOLUTIONS THAT CAN HELP YOU MAXIMISE THE BENEFITS AND MINIMISE TROUBLE

If you're a teacher, having eyes in the back of your head is an advantage. It's more intuition than a supernatural ability, but to be able to spot wrongdoing before it occurs is one of those skills that you develop naturally when working with children. Maybe it's the body language, the frantic whispers or the furtive glances of young people, but something always gives the game away. Now, however, we face a whole new challenge – mischief from the digital world.

Whether it's a computer, tablet or mobile device, your

classroom is becoming a digital playground, which at times can seem more of a hindrance than something that has any education benefit. What's more, this trend is set to grow: we're now approaching a stage where all students own some sort of mobile device capable of accessing the internet, making it even more difficult to regulate the content they're accessing. Classroom Management Software (CMS) is your ticket to regaining the confidence and control that you need to embrace – and experiment with – emerging technology in the classroom.



Becoming Big Brother

Essentially, CMS packages are remote network-monitoring programs that can be configured to pick up certain rooms or devices in your school. Most software of this type has common features, with screen monitoring the most-used; it allows a view of each student device to be sent back to your display. This is usually collated from the entire class and presented in a grid on your device. The advantage here is that it can zoom in to one particular student for a closer look or to display their work to the rest of the class.

The other common feature is internet monitoring, which allows dynamic control over the internet on a room-by-room basis. It can give you a direct on and off switch for internet activity, or you can restrict internet use to a list of chosen websites. Your school may already have a filtering system (at school level and at a local authority level), but these systems aren't completely infallible since they rely on matching words to the website content or URL. It's difficult to police the entire internet in this manner, and there are too many online distractions that aren't overtly nefarious. Games, music or funny images might not set off the software, but they can certainly cause disruption.

Many CMS packages not only allow you to monitor your classroom computers, but they enable you to actively deal with trouble. For example, you may be able to lock the computer, restart and shut it down, or even suspend mouse and keyboard use.

Beyond control, it's also about communication. CMS packages usually include an instant messaging service to send messages to individuals, groups or the entire class, and there may also be

CMS allows you to monitor classroom computers – and actively deal with trouble

options to invite students into a group chat. In the higher-end solutions you'll find extra features, such as blocking USB or CD-ROM drives, and restricting the use of printers. Some CMS solutions will also regulate what software the student can access on your network, so you can limit the options to only spreadsheets or word processing to keep them on task.

In addition to this, CMS can also be of use when collecting and distributing work. Many IT teachers currently use

their intranet, shared network drives, or VLE to send and gather students' work. This is another area in which CMS can be helpful: files can be pushed directly to the student or to their own personal network space. You can then retrieve documents in the same manner, as they upload the file back to you or into an area you specify.

One of the best features of CMS is the ability to instantly create a survey for the students, which I use at the start of the lesson to test knowledge and at the end to check progression. Depending on the software, you'll

have a pre-set bank of responses; from basic Boolean values (Yes and No) to your own inputted answers, which allow scope for subject-specific

responses. The responses can be instantly collated and graphed, providing a view of individual student answers (which could be pursued further through high-level questioning). The evidence collected here provides a valuable source of assessment to influence leveling and to inform future lessons. It can also make lessons more enjoyable, as you can throw some "fun" questions their way to gauge response and promote interactivity at any point within a lesson.

Setup and installation

Installing and setting up this type of software is potentially the most difficult part of the overall process; it needs to be configured for use on your network, and depending on how the school sources its infrastructure, you might be working with anything from an open system supported by in-house technical staff to a managed network with limited technical resources. If you're on a managed service with a third party, you'll probably be given access to their own type of CMS.

However, they still might be able to host other classroom management software, as long as it's validated for your school's use and you pay for the licence. Just be prepared for limited options if your school has this type of technical support.

If you want to move into an area of monitoring wireless or mobile devices, you'll also have to make sure this is set up correctly, since availability for students to access a shared and secure Wi-Fi network is essential. This is where

an in-house technical support system is invaluable, as you'll most likely be too busy teaching the lesson to have the time to manage a constant stream of connection issues. Once the initial installation and testing is complete, management becomes smoother for a teacher; they just want to use the tool to support effective teaching.

Your next concern may be the cost implications. Commercial classroom management software will have a variety of different packages available, usually organised into free, standard and professional versions. In the first

It's best to determine which features will be useful to your school on a day-to-day basis

instance I'd always suggest trying the free version: you'll get a feel for the product, see if there are any technical issues to overcome, and obtain a good indication of whether it's intuitive enough for all staff to use. A trial version will usually have most features available, but for use over a limited amount of time – such as a month. However, this should be ample to test all features as well as its integration to the network.

For the standard version of the software you'll probably need to purchase a licence; this version will have the majority of features and functionality available. Professional versions will offer extra capabilities that give you greater control of – or interaction with – other devices. This might be the best option should you wish to connect to a greater range of mobile devices, or to those that have specific OS requirements, such as iOS and Android.

It's best to determine which features will be useful to your school on a day-to-day teaching basis, and which features will give you the greatest return on your investment. Some features may seem attractive initially, but it's important to ask yourself whether you'll be using them regularly enough to justify the purchase of the more advanced version? Or, will the software work with the type of school network you have? Fundamentally, if the option of the free product or a trial version is available, always try that first, so the only cost to you is time rather than the site licence of a product that's too complex for your needs or too difficult to use.



ANDREW DIXON

Is head of ICT at Summerhill School in Kingsinford, West Midlands. He has written several books on Edexcel DIDA, featured on Teachers' TV, and was nominated for the Teacher of the Year award in 2009