

NetSupport School 10.5

Cost: A 25-user pack costs £28.20 per user. For a 100-user pack the price drops to £21.86. NetSupport's licensing model does not limit the amount of control (Teacher) machines you can deploy to. Annual maintenance is available at 20% of the cost.

In recent years Classroom Management software has become a trusted ally of many an ICT teacher and NetSupport School has always been seen as one of the most feature rich and teacher friendly solutions in the genre.

Now in their 20th year, developers NetSupport have a proven track record for maintaining the products relevance, each new update adding to NetSupport School's ability to handle the challenges presented by groups of increasingly PC savvy students.

There is a common misconception that software of this nature is simply there to 'spy' on the students and while monitoring plays a big part in what these products are all about it would be wrong to think of them as one-trick ponies.

Recently released NetSupport School 10.5 proves how far Classroom Management software has come in terms of making it a truly collaborative tool, benefitting the student as much as the teacher.

This comes to the fore with version 10.5's major new addition, Audio Mode. In this multimedia age students have the potential to be distracted from the task in hand on two fronts, visually and audibly. NetSupport School already handles the former very nicely with components such as Internet and Application Monitoring as well as the ability to track Instant Messenger conversations. In this new version NetSupport have gone a stage further by plugging the barrier to learning that the growing use of audible



teaching can bring.

Particularly relevant in a Language Lab environment, version 10.5 gives teachers the ability to see at a glance which PCs have current audio activity.

Expanding on the product's existing use of thumbnail technology, the teacher screen displays a crystal clear view of each student desktop with the thumbnails displaying an appropriate visual indicator to indicate where headset and/or microphone use is active. The thumbnails themselves have undergone a makeover with a handy 'slider' enabling you to easily custom size the thumbnails to fit the available space. The teacher interface can be viewed full-screen by pressing 'F11' should more room be needed to view the thumbnails.

Obviously this feature can be used for traditional monitoring to highlight instances where students have maybe wandered off track, after all, towards the end of an arduous French lesson what could be better than taking time out to listen to your favourite downloads. However, this tool is all about the interaction between student and teacher.

Having identified which students are using audio the teacher is then in a position to communicate with them through their own microphone and headset without disrupting the class. In a language lesson this could help correct pronunciation or discuss topic understanding. There's even a 'record' option that can be employed to store lesson content for later review. For example, while listening to a student, the teacher hears a great example of pronunciation. By clicking on the record button, NetSupport School records the student's audio stream ready to be saved or played back to the class. But, as listening is a reactive process – and typically something has to be heard before the decision can be made that it is worthy of recording – NetSupport School buffers the audio so that at the point the teacher begins recording, NetSupport School also includes the previous 60 seconds, ensuring nothing is missed.

This is a very useful addition to NetSupport School's array of class management features and is, as usual,

supplied as standard at no extra cost. With resources limited for many schools and dedicated language lab tools costly, NetSupport School provides a perfect feature set to allow any Modern Foreign Languages department to leverage the investment made in ICT, without the need for training or extensive IT skills. The Language Lab feature in NetSupport School is totally unique and not available in any other comparable solution. No specialist hardware is required, just a headset and microphone for each computer.

Moving on to some of the other updates you'll find in version 10.5. The Student Information bar is a great idea and again helps to dispel the 'spying' theory by providing each student with an obvious reference point as to the status of the lesson; websites and applications available to use, lesson objectives and time remaining, printer availability, buttons that initiate a 2-way chat or request for help from the teacher, rewards that the teacher may have assigned to the student for good effort and more.

Added in this version is a 'Manage Resources' option which will take away some of the frustrations students may have when trying to access course materials. Rather than attempting to direct students to the location of the resource, particularly if network drives are out of bounds, the teacher can populate the Information Bar with direct shortcuts to the information.

The 'Student Journal' feature is another positive, providing students with a valuable post-lesson reminder of key lesson content.



The journal is a PDF that can be populated with the pre-defined lesson objectives, which as mentioned above also pop up on the Student Information Bar as a reminder, and other relevant resources such as websites used, copies of presentation slides and test results.

ICT rooms, language labs, libraries; the extent to which technology plays a part in today's schools is ever increasing and the ease and speed of connectivity across more complex networks is always a key differentiator in Classroom Management solutions. NetSupport School's performance in this area has been streamlined with a new configuration option, 'Accelerate Browse'. When trying to connect to your student machines it can be frustrating if only a percentage of them are available at the start of your lesson. Rather than display a 'can't connect' message each time it finds an unavailable system, version 10.5 continues connecting to those it can while also providing an obvious visual indicator alongside each student icon for those it couldn't.

Still on the subject of connectivity, catering for environments where there is a defined room layout, NetSupport School 10.5 introduces a 'Connect to students in room' option. An intuitive startup wizard enables you to assign PCs to a particular room and quickly deploy the student software to those machines. At the start of a lesson the teacher simply indicates which of the pre-defined rooms they want to connect to. 'Roaming' Students also have the option of connecting to a designated room.

It's also good to see that version 10.5 makes the configuration of a Terminal Server setup a more simplified and

seamless process.

Classroom Management products like NetSupport School are often perceived as being a teacher's tool – a single application aimed at delivering greater control and interaction with students within an ICT lab. The truth, however, is that the value of any software solution is only realised when the environment it works within is fully operational and suitably maintained.

NetSupport School is unique in offering (as standard) a dedicated Technician's Console. The Console allows technicians to monitor all computers across the school in a single view. Not only is it possible to see real-time thumbnails of all connected computers, but also which teachers are connected to students within each room. In addition, with the approval of the teacher, instant remote assistance can be provided to any teacher or student PC.

The Technician's Console is designed to make the management of the ICT infrastructure easier, enabling technicians to perform an instant hardware or software inventory, see in real-time (and interact with) applications, and monitor the website activity, services and processes running on each PC. They can also easily take full remote control of any PC that requires attention.

Differentiating the requirements of a classroom teacher from that of the technician is a real masterstroke on NetSupport's part.

ICT for Education have reviewed past versions of NetSupport School and each time have been impressed with the advances made and version 10.5 certainly maintains NetSupport's reputation for responding to the challenges of the day.

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