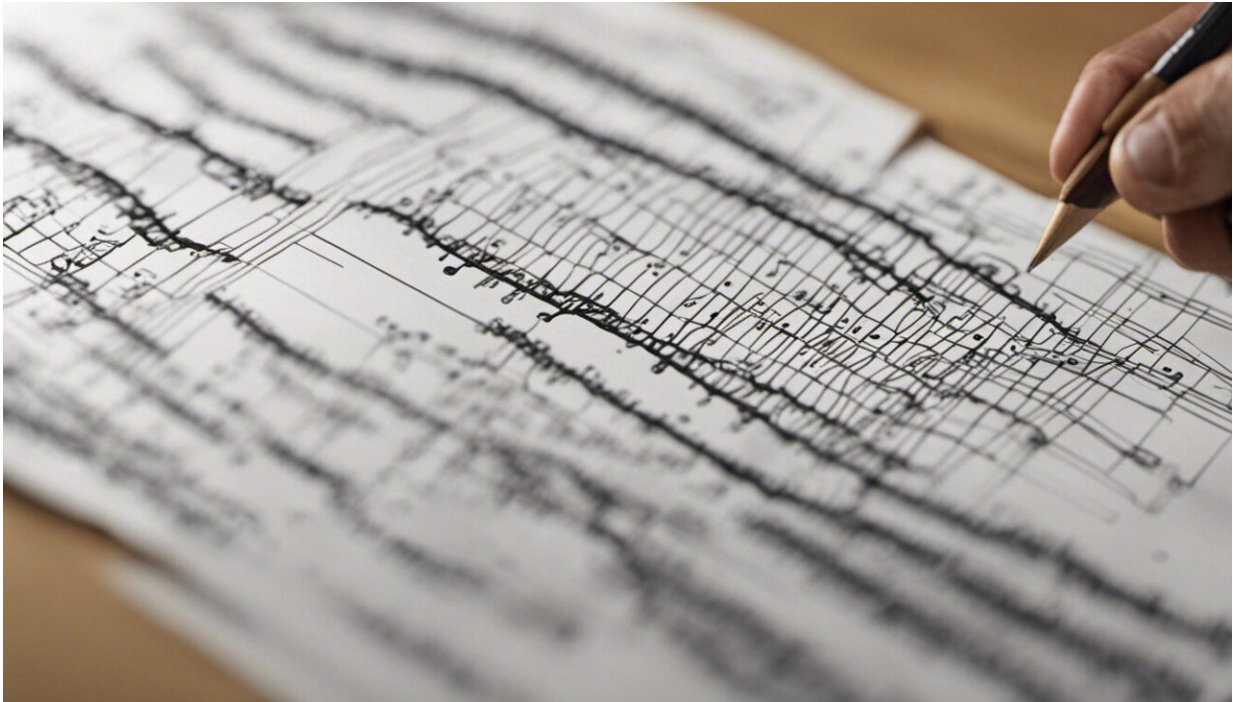# Why freemium software has no place in our classrooms

June 14 2022, by Lucas Johnson

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Digital teaching and communication tools are increasingly present in kindergarten to Grade 12 classrooms. By April 2020, not long after the onset of the pandemic, Google Classroom [had doubled its users to more than 100 million](#).

For educational technology companies, the pandemic accelerated opportunities to grow markets and profits.

Whether for facilitating learning, assessing learning or communicating with parents and guardians, digital tools are increasingly part of many children's and parents' school experiences.

In our ever-connected classrooms and societies, one notable element is the use of freemium software—software that is free for all users to obtain and use, but only with limited features. For a fee or monthly subscription, users can unlock further features.

Educational settings should focus on equity, especially when it comes to decisions related to the use of technology for teaching and learning.

In educational settings, software —whether for teaching and learning or parent-teacher communication—should not have tiered offerings where users who have the financial means to pay are privy to a better version of the software with additional features and tools.

School boards and provincial education ministries should focus on implementing universally accessible tools to eliminate two-tier access for learners and families that is enabled with freemium software. This may include licensing commercial software that has been carefully evaluated and assessed for how it supports student learning.

Marketing strategy

Freemium software is an excellent marketing strategy and economic driver, and it's become popular for multiple applications. Spotify software is one popular example for everyday music listening.

Some examples of educational software that have freemium versions are

[Prodigy Math](#) and [ClassDojo](#). According to these respective software companies, 20 million students a year use the [free version of Prodigy](#). More than [50 million teachers and families](#) use ClassDojo and [more than one million use the "plus" (premium) version](#).

Equity in classrooms

Freemium software exacerbates the [digital divide](#) for students who may be economically disadvantaged compared to their peers.

In turn, it contributes to what's known as the [Matthew Effect](#)—where those who have more acquire better, more beneficial experiences compared to those with less who are left behind.

In the cases where schools choose to use software that has a freemium version, boards should license the software to ensure that all learners have equitable access to the tool.

Hidden costs

What's important to understand is freemium software is not actually [free software](#), all things considered. With the [data being collected](#), the provider is gaining valuable data from users.

The software provider gains a direct marketing channel to the parent and child through the application. The developer can now target [the user with advertising for advanced features](#) that are accessible if they pay a fee.

The U.S.-based non-profit organization Fairplay [has called on schools to say no to using Prodigy](#), noting that the platform's "push to sell premium memberships is relentless, and aimed at kids. In just 19 minutes of 'studying,' we saw 16 ads for membership and only four math problems."

In February 2021, the organization's Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood and advocacy partners [sent a letter of complaint to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission about Prodigy](#).

> Prodigy is one of the most popular math games used in schools across the US.
> An investigation by our friends [@commercialfree](#) has revealed it's also manipulative and inequitable.
> Learn more at https://t.co/ZrxgoK23QM [#saynotoProdigy](#)
>
> — Consumer Action (@consumeraction) [February 19, 2021](#)

A school fee?

Parents who are able and willing to pay for premium access may do so without giving it much thought, or assume that the school has selected the tool and there is a cost, likening it to a field trip fee.

In addition to offering different forms of student and family access to tools, interactions enabled by premium features of freemium software could affect classroom relationships in inequitable ways.

For example, premium features of Prodigy Math enable [parents to compare their child's progress with their peers](#): if children are privy to this information about classmates, this could affect how they engage with other children. In ClassDojo, if parents pay [for the plus version](#), they are able to [access "read statuses"](#)—notifications about when their messages to teachers have been read. Teachers have the ability to turn this feature off.

This has the potential to strain the parent-teacher relationship or to create privileged or priority communication access to teachers by parents who have paid if the teacher feels pressured to respond or be accessible.

Universally accessible tools

As spending continues to increase on educational technology, it is important that software used for teaching and learning is evaluated by educational technology specialists and supported across entire school boards. If freemium software is being used, it should be selected based on evidence and licensed for the users.

Communication platforms need to work well and meet the needs of teachers and instructors while bolstering communication between the school and family without any cost to the parent or guardian.

Increasingly, data security and student privacy are concerns. Software that is deployed for teaching and learning in classrooms should be carefully selected using standard practices.

Supports for digital tools

Proper supports for digital tools are required in order see benefits from tools. It's important to realize that simply making technology accessible to students isn't a guarantee of better learning outcomes: For example, research from the United States shows that the extent to which educators support training and immersion with devices in schools matters to students' measurable learning gains.

In a time when school boards and schools are called upon to implement decisions that address student inequities and narrow the opportunity and access gaps students and families face, the free tier of freemium software is a step in the wrong direction.

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