

PRODUCT reviews

- Pixie 2
- Science Seekers

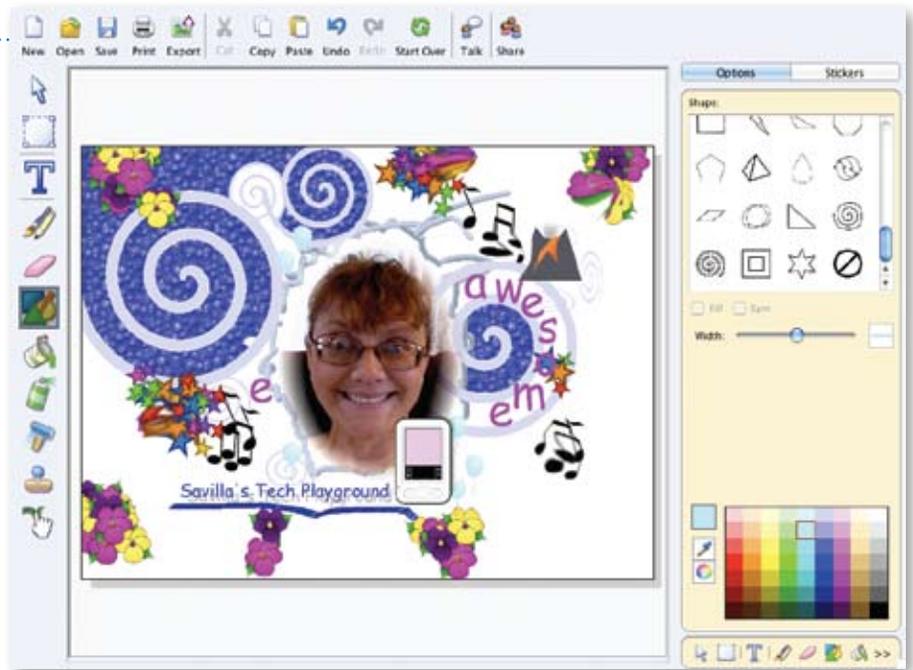
Pixie 2

By Savilla Banister

Pixie 2 is a paint and photo-editing tool for kids. Crafted with a simple interface yet loaded with sophisticated graphic features, the application is platform-friendly and ready for Linux, Mac, or Windows installation. It also includes interactive whiteboard options for the SMARTBoard and Promethan ActivBoard. Students and teachers may use Pixie 2 to create graphics, interact with curricular activities, edit photos, and produce multimedia slide shows.

Pixie tools are similar to those found in most paint programs, with some refreshing additions. For example, the Picture Viewer allows students to simply point to a folder of pictures, set the parameters (background music, transitions, and so on), and present a looping slide show in minutes. Pictures from a field trip could be quickly downloaded and shared in class on a networked projection system or on the Web with this tool. The Batch Converter supplied in Pixie allows users to select a folder of images and resize/reformat these to desired specifications with just a few clicks of the mouse, converting these pictures to other file types. If you have ever spent hours completing the same edits on hundreds of pictures, the Batch Converter will be a welcome tool. Users are given abilities to add advanced image effects—such as feathered edges, motion blur, or lens flare—usually found in higher-end editors.

The Pixie interface scaffolds nicely to accommodate the very young user



Pixie 2's export options allow students to share their work as images, movies, slide shows, and Web sites.

(ages 3–6) up to the tween audience (ages 10–12). This is done by layering options under “Advanced” or “Edit” buttons that open up additional features. Using the Preferences menus, users (or teachers) may enable or disable various choices as well. Accessibility preferences provide audio and visual supports for students with special needs, customizing the interface to allow for successful experiences. Pixie preferences also allow teachers to protect local and remote files by using the File Chooser and Library options to give students access to only the folders and files they select. With these choices, students might use Pixie to access additional media resources, including those housed in iTunes and iPhoto collections. Pixie also offers several levels of undo, with preference default at 50 levels. This undo feature can be set anywhere from 5 to unlimited, so students

don't have to be frustrated by “ruining” their work by making an unanticipated design choice. Pixie is very forgiving.

Pixie is accommodating when it comes to publishing (sharing) multimedia products, both in print and digital formats. Slideshows, complete with audio recorded within Pixie or imported from sound files, can be exported in video format or to HTML for the Web. The user can control sound and image quality/file size issues, so final products can be exported with desired characteristics. Web publishing is facilitated by Pixie options that allow FTP, Web DAV, and BlackBoard formatting. Students may print out their work as single graphics/images or as collections. Print formats include comic book, table tent, trading cards, and greeting card. Images may be exported in various file formats, including BMP, PNG, JPG, and GIF.

Tech4Learning seems to be dedicated to providing innovative professional development and support for those using their products. Students and teachers are provided access to a sizeable collection of images, templates, and lesson plans related to Pixie. The Pixie Activities library provides student activities related to math, science, social studies, and language arts. The Recipes for Success Web site (<http://www.recipes4success.com>) links to many of these resources. Professional development opportunities are offered, such as

the Developing Early Learning Foundation's workshop (http://www.tech4learning.com/staffdev/px_early.html), though fees are attached to these.

Pixie's goal of empowering students to learn by creating meaningful classroom projects aligns well with ISTE's refreshed NETS•S (<http://www.iste.org/nets>). Teachers may want to review other paint/photo-editing options, such as KidPix or TuxPaint, to determine the tools that best meet their classroom needs. In my view, Pixie 2 is a solid choice.

Pixie 2

\$44.95 single/\$179.95 lab pack (5)
Tech4Learning, Inc.
<http://www.tech4learning.com/pixie/>



Savilla Banister is an associate professor of classroom technology at Bowling Green State University. Dr. Banister taught visual arts in elementary schools prior to her tenure at BGSU. She continues to work with K-12 teachers as they integrate multimedia technologies into their classroom, and volunteers as I&L's curriculum specialist in the visual and performing arts.

Science Seekers

By Jared Mader and Ben Smith

Science Seekers from Tom Snyder Productions is an excellent source for environmental studies and guided research for students. It is designed for grades 5-8 and requires students to work collaboratively to solve an authentic problem. We reviewed the Safe Groundwater curriculum, but there are also challenges in The Changing Earth and Ecosystems in Balance.

The mission of the program is to identify, as a class, who is polluting the groundwater of the town. Stu-

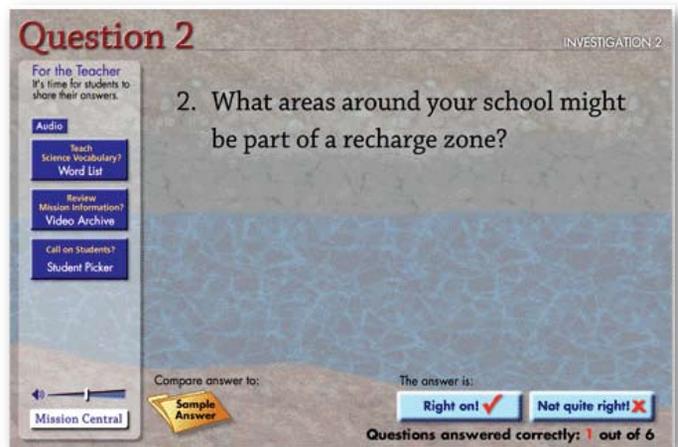
dents work in collaborative groups to become Science Experts. The program explains the roles and responsibilities of the group members, going beyond the typical group work model. After watching a video as a class, students read in their booklets and then work as a team to ensure that each group member understands the objectives of his or her task. The booklets provide reading strategies to help students work through their material as students answer questions. To ensure an equitable distribution of work, the

software integrates a Student Picker to see that all students are completing their own work. Students can view the answers and must get all questions correct before moving on.

Also included in the Teacher's Guide are hands-on science activities. While the activities are optional, these short labs strengthen the product's science value. The activities require students to collect data, make graphs, provide observations, and draw conclusions. The final problem requires students to make thought-



Students receive briefings from real scientists, providing critical information for their mission.



Topic-related questions generate class discussion.

ful choices based on observation and topic-related data.

Out of the box, teachers will find a CD-ROM (Mac OS X 10.3.9 or above or Windows compatible) with simple installation, a Teacher's Guide and one set of student guides. The retail cost is \$129 for one license, with discounts for multiple copies. Only one license is needed for a classroom, as the software is designed to run from one computer on an interactive white board. You may order it online at the company's Web site. The package provides PDF files of the student and teacher guides so you can make copies or work from the computer.

Science Seekers was developed in conjunction with the American Museum of Natural History and through a grant from NASA. The software immediately engages students by providing them with decision-making opportunities parallel to authentic

field experiences. The activities give a differentiated approach to content delivery. The multimedia interface provides multisensory access to information meeting the varied learning styles of the students. Its cross-curricular approach with regard to vocabulary lends itself as a tool for an integrated approach with Language Arts curriculum. The software and its activities also have the ability to read the instructions to students, meeting the needs of auditory learners, ESL students, and others.

We were impressed with the total package that Science Seekers provides and recommend it as a product for environmental studies. The cross-curricular connection to Language Arts, rich vocabulary, multimedia content, and virtual lab experiences will allow students to gain a strong understanding of the material with an emphasis on problem-solving and collaboration with their peers.

Science Seekers

\$129

Tom Snyder Productions

<http://www.tomsnyder.com>



Jared Mader has been a chemistry teacher for the past nine years and is now the director of technology at Red Lion Area Senior High School in Red Lion, Pennsylvania.



Ben Smith has been a physics teacher at Red Lion Area High School for 18 years. He and Mader are the science curriculum specialists for L&L. Mader and Smith have been recognized as Keystone Technology Innovators in Pennsylvania and have presented at NSTA and NECC.

Call for Curriculum Submissions

Have you or a colleague taught a lesson or unit integrating technology that went particularly well?

Do you have:

- Tips, tricks, or tidbits?
- Stories or quotes that demonstrate student learning?
- A great tech tool or resource?
- Quick ideas easily adapted to other settings or content areas?

If you answered yes to any one of these, please call or write the editor with your ideas: Kate Conley • kconley@iste.org • 1.541.434.8926



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