Mobile Technology in Education: Part One
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How competition could drive innovation in education technology.

According to a report released at the Wireless EdTECH conference in October 2012 – called Learning in the 21st Century: Taking It Mobile! – about 50 percent of high schoolers and 40 percent of middle schoolers use smart phones or tablets on a regular basis.

Apple has been 'taking it mobile' in the education sector for some time. In the third quarter of 2012, education-related Mac sales were at an all-time high, and twice as many iPads as Macs were purchased for the second consecutive quarter. Those numbers leveled off this year, but until recently, there was little reason to suspect that Apple's tablet-driven hegemony over the education market would not continue unchallenged.
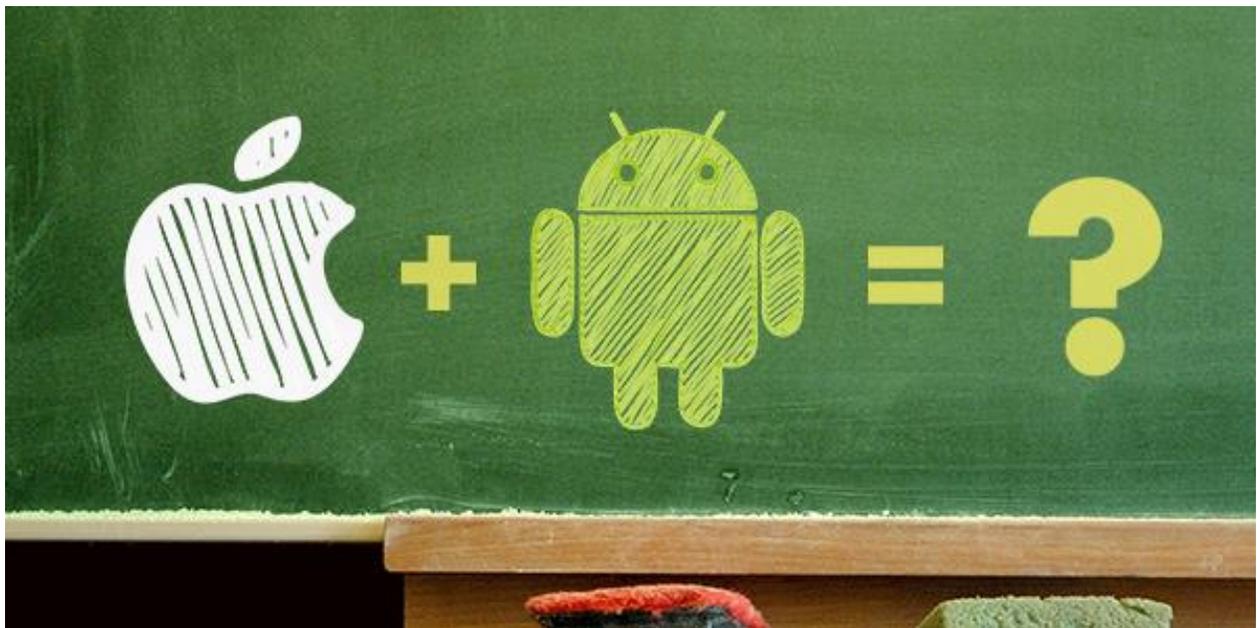
Graphic credit: Madison Andrews

Then Google announced its Chromebooks for Education initiative, followed by an announcement at the 2013 I/O conference about the forthcoming Google Play for Education section of the app store. Play for Education will allow schools, teachers and students to search for apps by subject matter and grade level. Scheduled for a fall 2013 launch, all submissions to Play for Education will be reviewed and recommended by a team of educators, who will then assist in categorizing and making sure the apps align to Common Core Standards.

What differentiates Google Play for Education from other software models is how it plans to distribute content. Everything from apps to books to YouTube videos will be pushed out wirelessly

"to individuals or groups of any size, across platforms, schools, or even districts." This could set it apart in terms of administrator-friendly tools, since many distribution models still require hand-wired syncing. Even better news for educators: Apps can not only be distributed, but purchased in bulk through a variety of payment options.

The response from tech media has been predictably hyperbolic – emphasizing, in particular, how Google's foray into education amounts to an all-out declaration of war on Apple. At this point, it's too early to tell how Google will fare in this market. And Google execs, at any rate, don't welcome the comparison to competitors.

"Every story I read about Google is 'us versus some other company,' or some stupid thing, and I just don't find that very interesting," said Larry Page in his 2013 I/O keynote address. "We should be building great things that don't exist. Being negative isn't how we make progress. Most important things are not zero-sum. There is a lot of opportunity out there."

Still, this statement seems a little naïve and overly optimistic. Any tech company with aspirations in the education market will have to compete with Apple. Education is – as the company's executives continue to reiterate – in Apple's DNA. For years, it's offered discounts on hardware for schools and students, and pioneered much of the software used for creating web pages, projects, podcasts, videos and music in the classroom. At one point, Apple's mission statement even included students and educators, along with 'creative professionals,' as part of its core demographic.

But the [mission statement](#) has changed since then to accommodate a broader focus on the entire consumer electronics industry. And, as Audrey Watters notes in her fantastic [article](#) on Hack Education, the role and focus of education technology has changed profoundly since No Child Left Behind was enacted in 2001. According to Watters, it "made the sorts of devices that [Steve] Jobs wanted – powerful and empowering and creative and beautiful – far less important." Since then, Apple's educational tools have become more about administration and centralized control, as opposed to the open-ended learning on which Jobs used to wax poetic.

Google Play for Education will not be immune to those restrictive forces. But it could introduce some much-needed competition into the market. In part 2 of this series, I'll discuss the current prices of mobile hardware for school districts in an Apple-dominated market – and explain how Google could entice consumers with serious savings.