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Britannica introduced the NEW Learning Zone in 2008! Find out what *School Library Media Activities Monthly* is saying about what's new from Britannica!

Britannica Learning Zone: Exploratory Content and Fun for PreK-2 Learners.
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“A primary or preschool age learner seated in front of a computer screen naturally expects two things will happen. They expect the screen will entertain them, and they expect to use the keyboard and mouse for interaction. *Britannica Learning Zone*, an interactive learning environment targeted for grades PreK-2, fulfills both of these expectations. Whereas other major encyclopedia competitors have made their online encyclopedias accessible to elementary and even lower elementary age groups, Encyclopedia Britannica has made their encyclopedia accessible for the preschool age and just in time for nationally expanding preschool education. The *Learning Zone* is available either as an add-on to other Encyclopedia Britannica products or as a standalone. This product will fill a niche in library resources for the youngest set through second grade.

Meeting the Needs of Young Learners

The idea of an encyclopedia that could be used by the youngest students in school is intriguing. With all of their questions and natural curiosity, they need access to information equal to that of their slightly older peers. Since they are beginning readers, as well as beginning writers and keyboarders, an electronic encyclopedia with age-appropriate multimedia content is ideal for their learning. Yet, most online encyclopedias with electronic searching are too sophisticated for many of these preschool and primary learners.

Britannica Learning Zone has no search box for keyword search, no hierarchical or browse search terms to click on, and no blocks of text on its homepage. In fact, the homepage is where the entertainment begins to draw in preschool and primary-age learners without losing them to assumptions that the site might be “boring” or that it looks too much like “learning” (assumptions from a first grader accessing another Web site supposedly geared for primary learners that had too much text to suit her).

PreK-2nd grade students will love the rich, colorful design of the *Britannica Learning Zone* homepage (and so will their teachers and library media specialists)! Upon opening the site, the eye is inevitably drawn to the top two-thirds of the screen that has a beautifully framed horizontal space resembling a wide-screen TV.

The bottom third of the screen has four attractive activity icons labeled with one-word category names: Explore, Play, Read, and Draw. Along the bottom is a continuously scrolling set of thumbnail graphics showing additional activity choices. These thumbnails change to correspond with the category the user has selected.



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Getting Started

Newton, the dog, greets students immediately with his spoken welcome. The welcome message is also displayed on the screen, “Hi. I’m Newton. Welcome to the Britannica Learning Zone! We’re going to have lots of fun! Just move your mouse over something, and I will tell you how it works.” Even more impressive is how quietly Newton waits for users to move the mouse over one of the four categories to get started.

Explore

Explore is the first choice and has a globe icon. Once selected, a landscape background with a large globe image appears in the framed wide-screen TV space with flags on every continent. Newton prompts, “Move your mouse over the map and click to learn about the world.” There are thirty video choices accessible in two ways. Moving the mouse over each flag on the map activates an instant pop-up thumbnail image and the location name, such as Amazon or Southwest. At the same time, the set of thirty thumbnail images, representing the videos, continuously scroll along the bottom of the screen. Users may click either place to start the videos. Each video opens and begins to play within the framed space.

The thirty videos are approximately two minutes each in length, and they correspond to various geographical places. Some videos emphasize the people and tourism or industry of the region, while others cover one or more animals. Several of the animal videos show animals in their natural habitats with only nature and animal sounds in the background. Sometimes the labeling makes it difficult to tell what the video will show. For example, the video labeled Northern Region of the United States is all about bald eagles.

Others are narrated or have people talking about animals. Regions of the United States include the Southwest, Southeast, Midwest, Northern Region, Pacific Coast, Alaska, and Hawaii. There is also one for Canada, but not for Mexico. The European choices are Austria, France, Italy, and Switzerland. Five regions of Africa are represented: Southern Africa, Kenya, Equatorial Forest, West Africa, and two videos of the African Savannah (one with lions and one with elephants). Choices for South America include two videos of the Amazon and two of the Brazilian Amazon. Videos for Asia cover China, Nepal/Tibet, Shanghai, and Japan. There are three videos for Australia, and there is one for Antarctica.

While a video is playing, Newton politely nods his head and wags his tail while patiently waiting for movement of the mouse. If the user moves the mouse over another option, such as Read or Draw, Newton announces the topic, but does not interrupt the video unless the user clicks on the topic.

Knowing how much information young children can absorb from memorable bits of video, it seemed the Explore section would be the most popular. However, given the choice and opportunity to explore any area(s) of the *Learning Zone* during a half-hour



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time period, many first- and second-grade students chose Play or Draw to begin. Some spent all of their time in these areas. A smaller number navigated through several videos in Explore. Few students chose Read in this initial session. One explanation might be that students didn't know the meaning of Explore and didn't know it included videos. Furthermore, they might not have realized that Read would not only allow them to read fun word definitions, but it would also read them aloud.

Play

The option Play is a set of games with quizzes based on the content of the *Britannica Discovery Library* print set. It was created to help users learn colors, numbers, shapes, sound, and time. Of all the components, the games are the least appropriate for the older members of this age group. When a second grader figures out that a game is attempting to teach him or her to add one plus one and the meaning of the plus sign, or that the sun, egg yolks, bananas, and cheese are all the color yellow, he or she is likely to feel either highly intelligent or surprisingly insulted.

Read

There are over 1,000 words and 650 illustrations in Read which are drawn from *Merriam-Webster's Primary Dictionary* (reviewed in *SLMAM*, November, 2005). Known for its entries that feature jokes, puns, and riddles, Merriam-Webster's kid-friendly definitions provide a fun way to see and hear words used in context as they are read aloud. If children are willing to choose Read, the humor and the reading aloud should draw in even reluctant readers.

The navigation is notable in the Read feature as in all areas of the *Learning Zone*. When the user clicks Read, the dictionary opens on the big screen to a random word card within the As and the word definition is immediately read aloud. Once finished, the orange arrows on either side of the word card begin to pulsate, indicating to the user the intuitive possibility of moving to the next word, or going back to the previous word. Holding the mouse over these arrows brings up the text cues, Read More or Go Back. The only drawback was reflected in one second grader excited to have figured out how to apply his alphabetizing skills to find the word table after he clicked on the letter T and started at tricycle. After scrolling as quickly as he could, past each word that was announced, to get to table, he then commented that he really wanted to go back and see the word "trick" (with the picture of the magician), but he thought it would be too far to go back.

Meanwhile, alphabet letters are continuously scrolled at the bottom of the screen. Holding the mouse over the letter S stops the scrolling and prompts Newton to announce, "Click here to learn about words that start with the letter 'S'."



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Draw

Draw is a simple online art program with ten crayon colors, an eraser, and the ability to widen or narrow the width of the line. Compared to specialty draw programs like *Kid Pix*, this program does not match up. However, kids are attracted to the draw feature and it provides the curious students another outlet for their own creativity as they explore, read, and think using this product.

It should be noted that within Draw, the picture can be printed but the “Clear” feature does not have an “Undo” option and the file cannot be saved as a separate file, so once it is cleared, it is gone.

Curricular Connections

This product has two potential curricular connections. First, students could be guided in their exploration to access specific categories or activities that support the curriculum. For example, a class studying China might all be directed to watch the China video. Then they may be asked to recall a fact they learned from the video. Users may also be prompted to ask a question after watching a video, which could lead to seeking information in other library resources. Second, students could use *Britannica Learning Zone* for open exploration either as a class or in a classroom learning center.

Additionally, the teacher has the option to limit the content to which students have access. The real curricular power in this resource may be found by using the Teacher Tools that allow teachers to do three things. First, a class can be created and students' names listed with assigned logins. Second, teachers can click to show or hide content determined by their curricular goal. For example, they can choose which of the thirty videos, games, letters from the dictionary, and draw objects should be made available to the class. Third, teachers can use a tool to generate reports that show what content each student viewed within each activity. For example, the sample science lesson in the Teacher Tools resource guide explains how the teacher can select all the geographic videos that feature animals and all the dictionary letters that contain the definitions for those animals. Thus, the students could view the video about the Northern Region that features the bald eagle and then be guided to the dictionary entry for eagle.

Summary

The combination of the entertainment-style layout, kid-friendly navigation, and interactivity of the *Learning Zone* make this product outstanding for young explorers in preschool and primary grades. Whether the early childhood curriculum stresses student- or teacher-directed exploration, this product fits the niche. Students from preschool to the primary age range will not only enjoy this product, but will be capable of navigating all areas independently. Teachers who want to guide or focus students on a specific geographic region or an animal study also have the capability for selectively including and guiding students to specific content.



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