

2008

Software Review: Reviewing SoftChalk™ —An Instructional Aid

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Recommended Citation

Baker, Ardith & Sobilo, Lisa (2008). Software Review: Reviewing SoftChalk™ —An Instructional Aid. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning for Christians in Higher Education*, 3(1), 6-10. Retrieved from http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/sotl_ched/vol3/iss1/4

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Reviewing SoftChalk™ —An Instructional Aid

by Ardith Baker and Lisa Sobilo

Introduction

These days the term “PowerPoint” is almost synonymous with the term “presentation.” In fact, PowerPoint is often the first and only method students and instructors think of when there is a need to convey information to a large group. Although the creative backgrounds and text animation of Microsoft PowerPoint put on quite a show for viewers, other alternatives, such as SoftChalk™ *LessonBuilder*, offer a new level of interactivity.

SoftChalk™ *LessonBuilder* software is available for purchase at <http://www.softchalk.com>. *LessonBuilder* Version 4 remains the most current version of the program, and prices range from a \$450 educational price (for faculty and staff of accredited institutions) to the \$795 standard retail price. The full version of the product is [free to try](#) for 30 days, at which time users must enter a license code to continue to utilize the program. This license includes the use of *ScoreTracker*, a proprietary service that assists with the collection and organization of student scores that have been submitted to SoftChalk™ *Lessons* via an online account. The SoftChalk™ company can be contacted at 877.638.2425 or via [email](#).

Description

LessonBuilder Features

The SoftChalk™ website defines *LessonBuilder* as “a powerful web lesson editor that lets you easily create engaging, interactive web lessons for your e-learning classroom.”

LessonBuilder files work with the most commonly used web browsers and are compatible with the operating systems of both Windows and Mac. The software is programmed to check for updates automatically and supports a variety of media formats, including those that follow:

- Audio: aiff, au, mid, midi, mp3, ra, ram, rmf, wav, wma
- Video: avi, mpeg, mpg, mov, wmv
- Flash: swf
- Shockwave: dcr
- Web Movie: swf

The presentations created by *LessonBuilder*, called “Lessons,” represent a mixture of a Microsoft PowerPoint slideshow (sans animation) and an enhanced webpage. Users can choose to insert page breaks (Figure 1), which make each page act as a slide, or to omit page breaks and place all of the information in one long continuous page. It should be noted that the page break option can increase the size of the final file because each “page/slide” is stored as a separate webpage. If the second option is chosen, bookmarks (that is, internal links) can be placed at key points in the page to facilitate easy navigation; additionally, the instructor can add a “Table of Contents” feature, which can also be used as a navigation tool.



Figure 1. A sample of the “Page Break” option, which breaks the presentation into separate slides.

Numerous other features are available with *LessonBuilder*. “Sidebars,” which resemble the bookmark feature in Microsoft Internet Explorer, also allow for easy navigation throughout supplementary files and webpages. This feature offers such options as “On This Page” (Figure 2), “Handouts,” “Learn More,” “More Resources,” and “Text Only.”

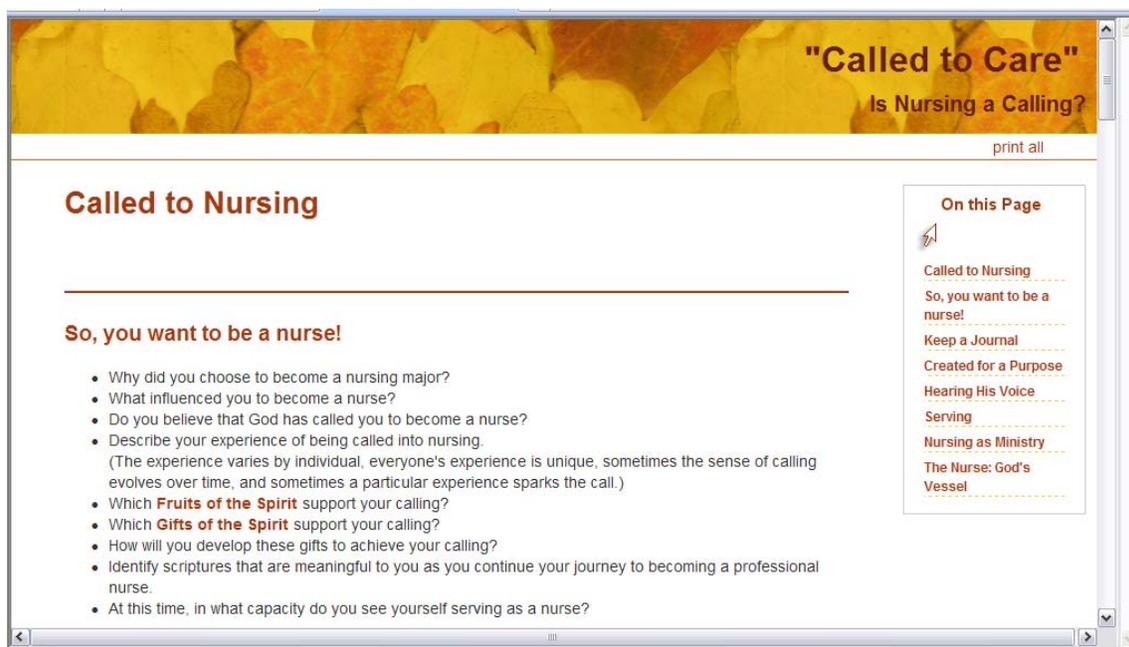


Figure 2. A sample of the feature “On This Page.”

Like PowerPoint slideshows, *LessonBuilder* lessons can be enhanced by the addition of images, audio and video files, and even [Youtube](#) movies. Page displays can be customized using the “StyleBuilder” feature, which, regrettably, requires knowledge of html formatting that is by no means common knowledge to all instructors.

Instructors can ask students to demonstrate their knowledge of the material presented on each page by completing either a “QuizPopper” or an “Activity.” QuizPoppers include matching exercises, ordering exercises, and true/false, multiple choice, multiple answer, and short answer questions (Figure 3). *LessonBuilder* Activities are Flash-based (thus, requiring an updated version of a [Flash player](#) installed in the user’s browser) and include crosswords; flashcards; timelines; slide shows; labeling, ordering, and sorting problems; and “DragNDrop,” “Hot Spot,” and “Seek A Word” games. Both QuizPoppers and *LessonBuilder* Activities can be placed anywhere in the lesson and even in multiple places in the same lesson. Once students complete a quiz, they can use “ScoreTracker” to print a certificate of completion or a score summary. Instructors can also access this material and use it to email completion results to individual students.

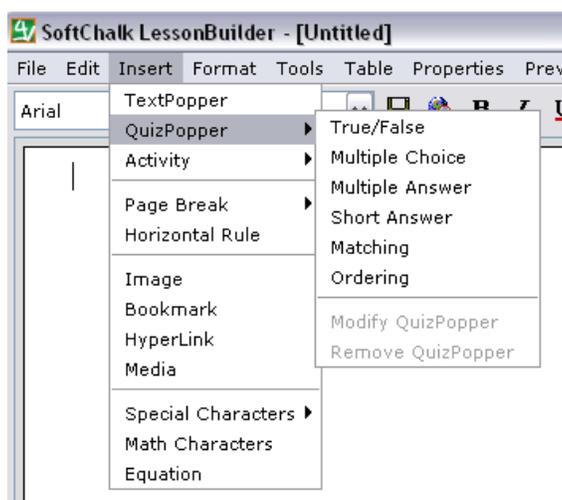


Figure 3. The pull-down menu displaying options for evaluating student knowledge.

Another standout feature in *LessonBuilder* is the opportunity to insert “TextPoppers,” annotations that appear as pop-up bubbles when the cursor is placed over a highlighted word or phrase. TextPoppers (Figure 4) can be images, hyperlinks, and the aforementioned forms of media. These features are especially beneficial for individual study because they add depth and dimension to the Lesson; however, too many Text Poppers on a single page can easily become cumbersome and distracting.

LessonBuilder Training

SoftChalk™ offers a generous variety of training options, the three most prominent being “webinars” (short live courses), online workshops, and onsite workshops. The webinars utilize web conferencing to connect users with a SoftChalk™ professional. These one-hour sessions usually consist of instruction followed by useful examples and a question-and-answer session. Online workshops are a longer and more in-depth version of the short courses, lasting three hours instead of one, and accommodating up to 30 participants web conferencing from different locations. Onsite workshops are just that—workshops conducted at a specific institution. These sessions are also three-hours long and allow for the most customization, as they are tailored to the needs and interests of the instructors of the specific institution.

Early Christian Nurses

Phoebe, a woman of high social status & wealth and fri
visiting nurse. Visiting nurses cared for the poor living ir

The early Christian Church established the order of De:
endeavored to practice the *Corporal Works of Mercy*:

- To feed the hungry.
- To give water to the thirsty.
- To clothe the naked.

These in. ers. They cleane
hospi... persons of all age:
nurse educators and students of nursing.

Figure 4. A sample of a TextPopper.

In addition to an impressive gamut of training options, SoftChalk™ offers [email support](#) and a comprehensive [user guide](#). This document can be easily downloaded to an instructor's computer and referred to for step-by-step instructions for virtually all actions related to *LessonBuilder*. Myriad screenshots and large legible type enhance the explanations and offer clarity to even the most novice user.

Discussion

SoftChalk™ *LessonBuilder* offers many helpful and innovative features that make it stand out in the PowerPoint-dominated educational sphere. Each lesson provides an element of interactivity not found in similar presentation programs, which limits their display to audio and visual elements. Also, converting presentations from PowerPoint to *LessonBuilder* is relatively easy if the instructor chooses to import each PowerPoint slide as an image. With *LessonBuilder*, instructors can receive immediate feedback regarding each student's comprehension of the material by using the QuizPopper and Activity options. Students, too, can be given easy access to lessons by accessing them through the various Learning Management Systems with which SoftChalk™ is compatible, some of the foremost being [Desire2Learn](#), [Blackboard](#), [Angel](#), and [Moodle](#). Additionally, SoftChalk™ offers user-friendly support in a way only a small company can. Their support files are understandable and thorough and emails receive a response within 24 hours.

Despite its strong points, SoftChalk™ *LessonBuilder* has a few facets that, unfortunately, do not stand up to those of its competition. For example, importing slides from PowerPoint to *LessonBuilder* as images robs the slides of any former animation and background layout. Additionally, any text or graphics in the imported image cannot be edited because *LessonBuilder* reads the image as a whole picture, not the slide it formerly was. Therefore, the result may not be worth the effort. Even with imported items from PowerPoint, the stylistic aspects of *LessonBuilder* are lacking, and the User Guide frankly admits that “without a style, your *Lesson* looks similar in a web browser to the way it looks in *LessonBuilder*. There is no header or footer. There are no sidebars; there are just navigation links (previous page | next page) at the bottom of

a page.” The majority of users will most likely forgo the arduous task of customizing each lesson’s layout using the html-extensive StyleBuilder, and those uncomfortable with formatting webpages will find this task difficult initially. Although the user guide provides refreshingly clear instructions, Mac users find themselves with a distinct disadvantage because the myriad screenshots display the Windows version of SoftChalk™. Desire2Learn users are also at a disadvantage because grade book integration between Desire2Learn and ScoreTracker has not yet been achieved.

Recommendations

All things considered, SoftChalk™ *LessonBuilder* is best used in situations in which personal interaction is lacking, such as distance learning and online courses. In these situations the program can act as the instructor’s proxy, giving additional explanations and checking student comprehension. In large group settings where an instructor is present, however, programs like Microsoft PowerPoint continue to prove stronger through the superior audio-visual elements they offer (animation features, background displays, etc.). If an instructor wants to take the time to construct dual presentations—one in PowerPoint and one in *LessonBuilder*—he or she could derive some benefit from uploading the *LessonBuilder* version to his or her institution’s student-teacher interface and requiring students to review the information through the use of QuizPoppers or other *LessonBuilder* Activities. Instructors should be warned of the time-consuming nature of conversion, however.

Since the process is still far too dependent on Microsoft Office for formatting and layout, it would be advisable to start either from scratch when creating *Lessons* or simply to use SoftChalk™ for making pages of supplemental quizzes, etc., that can be placed on the instructor’s Learning Management Service alongside the PowerPoint. It appears that SoftChalk™ does, in fact, live up to its self-proclaimed purpose—providing those involved in the educational process with “a powerful web lesson editor that lets instructors easily create engaging, interactive web lessons for their e-learning classrooms.” Just do not tell Microsoft.

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