

Software Review

Let's make learning fun too. Using Crossword Compiler Version 6.0

Allan Jones

Source: Antony Lewis, *Crossword Compiler*, 16 Townley Rd, London SE22 8SR but web site contains international purchase options also.

Web site: <http://www.crossword-compiler.com/>

Product information: Free on-line demonstration version available. Otherwise single user licence £28.65: multiple licences available.

Many aspects of the biosciences are very terminology-dense and have major, specific vocabularies associated with their study. Such vocabularies are difficult for students to learn and we need to facilitate that learning in a format that provides 'clues' to assist the definition of, and familiarisation with, the terms. Crosswords have considerable potential for the provision of alternative assessment/self-assessment activities and instruments because, for at least a significant component of the student population, they are perceived as 'fun' to do and because the inclusion of a proportion of more generic words facilitates the identification of more difficult scientific terms by providing 'starter' clues. Their successful incorporation into first year biology teaching at the University of Sydney has been recently described (Franklin *et al*, 2003) whilst Wise (2001) has also considered their use in the support of revision.

The main difficulty in using crosswords clearly lies in their construction and this is where Crossword Compiler comes into its own. I have used versions of the programme for many years and have found it to be a very valuable, but very reasonably priced, software tool. It requires only a relatively short learning curve to use in the context of subject-specific teaching and learning: clearly to use it for more complex cryptic uses, generally inappropriate in bioscience teaching and learning contexts, would require much more development time. The principal time investment lies in

- compiling lists of appropriate words to enter into the topic dictionaries that you will create and
- the initial development of appropriate clues that then can become part of a growing clues database to be re-used as you develop new crosswords.

Appropriate word-lists are easily compiled into dictionaries from glossaries and dictionaries and can be added to gradually if required. Development of clues requires a bit more imagination but, for scientific use, this is a relatively straightforward task for most people. Many terms already exist as definitions in the

valuable add-on called [WordWeb Pro](#), a linked thesaurus/dictionary that facilitates the construction of clues for many generic words.

The [resulting crosswords](#) can be printed out easily, with or without clues and/or [answers](#) and the output from version 6 includes options for outputting in either a static or an interactive web format, the latter version working by means of a JAVA applet that is provided and licensed for single user use with the programme.

I have used crosswords (printed form only) developed using Crossword Compiler in the context of learning support and self-assessment for over 5 years in courses in Invertebrate Biology and Environmental Science and they were generally well received by the student population. About 20% of students did not enjoy their use, although they did appreciate the value of using them to learn terminology and they were considered useful revision aids even by these students. Clearly one must also bear in mind issues relating to disabilities such as dyslexia and impaired vision, especially if contemplating their use in a summative, rather than formative, context.

References

Franklin, S., Peat, M & Lewis, A. (2003) Non-traditional interventions to stimulate discussion: the use of games and puzzles. *Journal of Biological Education*, **37** (2), 79 – 84.

Wise, A. (2001) Web-based crossword puzzles support revision. *Active Learning in Education*, **2** (2), 180 – 188.

Reviewed by A M Jones
Life Sciences Teaching Unit
School of Life Sciences
University of Dundee
Dundee DD1 4HN
a.m.jones@dundee.ac.uk