

E-books and E-readers in the School Library Collection

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Tamzen Kulyk
SSLA Executive



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E-books are not a passing fad, nor are they a new technology of the 21st century. The first e-book was developed by Michael S. Hart in 1971. Since then, a slow and steady development of the e-book has occurred until just recently when e-book sales skyrocketed. In January 2011, Amazon announced they were doing more trade in e-books than in hardcovers, selling 143 digital editions for every 100 hardcovers sold (Schiller, 2010). According to a report released by the Association of American Publishers, sales of e-books in January 2011 increased by more than 115 percent compared to the same time the year before, and overall e-book sales have tripled from 32.4 million in January 2010, to 69.9 million in January 2011 (Kearney, 2011). Based on the growing popularity of e-books and e-readers, it is evident they are here to stay, but where do teacher-librarians begin? What are the advantages of having e-books in the school library, and what do we need to consider before including them in our collections?

Why E-books and E-readers?

E-books are an excellent addition to the school library because they offer new opportunities to improve student learning. Some of the basic features of e-books that support student learning and the process of learning to read are: (a) customizable displays that allow the reader to change the font and text size; (b) the ability to read the text in a book aloud, privately with headphones or shared among many; (c) reading support features such as a built-in dictionary or websites; (d) combining text with auditory and visual stimuli; (e) social highlighting; (f) the ability to make or take notes; and (g) internal search capabilities (Abram, 2010).

The International Reading Association (IRA) indicates the Internet and other forms of technology such as e-books are redefining the nature of reading, writing, and communication, and will continue to do so in the years to come (IRA, 2009). As a result, reading and literacy instruction are undergoing tremendous transformations as

new technologies such as e-books require new literacy skills (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Therefore, it is important to begin integrating digital and electronic texts into school libraries and to support students and teachers during this process. E-books can be a way to open new doors and to create opportunities for students and for teachers to access books 24/7, and to interact with a wide range of texts and information (Larson, 2010).

Learning how to access, to navigate, and to explore using e-books are important skills for learners as they prepare for their futures. We know that in order for our students to succeed in the future, they will require the ability to adapt and to apply their knowledge as new literacy skills continue to emerge and to evolve. This has become evident as provinces, states, and countries around the world have infused learning standards into their curricula that focus on the “skills that students need to manage and use information but also emphasize the merging of multiple literacies required for learning in today’s media-intense and information rich landscape” (Zmuda & Harada, 2008, p. 86).

How do we know e-books help students learn? In order to answer this question, teachers, literacy coaches, teacher-librarians, and administrators must work together to develop an understanding about what the research says, to make a plan to collect and to track data, and to speak a common language around learning theory (Polanka, 2011).

Challenges and Considerations

One of the first challenges of including e-books and e-readers in a school library collection is determining what devices to select, or what vendor from which to purchase or subscribe. An e-reader device such as the Kindle, Kobo, iPad, or Sony Reader can store hundreds of books, magazines, blogs, and documents. Most e-readers have: built in dictionaries, internal search capabilities, customizable settings and displays, reading support features such as text to speech, bookmarking, and highlighting. The price, functionality, purchasing options, and sharing abilities vary with each device. Before purchasing e-readers, some questions to consider are: a) Will the device be loaned out to students or just available to classrooms? b) To whom will this device be available? c) Does your school or division have a user agreement or policy in place for such devices? d) What is the purpose of the device? e) Who will be in charge of

managing this device? f) How are books purchased and is this a seamless process? g) Can purchased books be downloaded to multiple devices? h) Can the e-reader and e-books be catalogued? i) Where can I purchase books, and will this suit my collection development needs?

Some of the companies that provide subscription e-book content are Gale Cengage, Follett, EBSCO, ABC-CLIO, Facts on File, Rosen, NetLibrary, and Overdrive. Each of these companies has e-books that can be accessed from a laptop computer, but only a few, such as Follett and Overdrive, currently provide access to e-book content through handheld devices and smartphones. Libraries pay for an annual subscription, or pay for a set number of e-books. There are also a few online subscription services available for beginning readers: Bookflick, TumbleBooks, and the International Children's Digital Library, which is free.

Before selecting a vendor or a device for your school library, it is essential to consider your school and community needs. You may want to weigh the pros and cons of e-readers, e-book providers, and subscriptions to determine what method of access would most benefit your users. Does your budget allow for devices or subscriptions to be purchased? Do your students have high speed or wireless Internet access from home? If the majority of your students don't, then purchasing an e-book subscription from a vendor does not make sense. Do students have devices such as iPods, laptops, or smartphones to which they may download content? If so, check with the provider to see what devices they support and if books can be downloaded and saved for later to be read without a wireless connection. Another consideration is the availability of a library technician. Will the e-reader and e-books be catalogued? Are MARC records available from the e-book providers? Who will be in charge of tracking and organizing what books are on the device? Last, you will want to check the provider's licensing agreement, as this will determine how many students can access an e-book simultaneously.

Barriers

Despite the recent explosion of e-books and e-readers, there are still many issues and barriers to overcome. First, not all books are currently available in e-book format. This could be due to the ongoing problem of digital rights

management (DRM) facing all libraries. DRM is “a technology that allows copyright owners to regulate and manage their content when it is disseminated in a digital format, and it is the reason that some patrons cannot access some of the downloadable content that libraries provide” (Houghton-Jan, 2007, p. 52). Due to the complicated nature of this issue, many publishing companies and authors are hesitant to embrace the market. Many readers are hesitant to buy in because what you can do with a print book that you own varies greatly from that of an e-book. They question the viability of the market when currently you can lend out a print book, give it away, copy a few pages, and even sell it if you feel so inclined. But this is not the case for an e-book. Why not? All e-books contain a DRM code that limits what the user can do with them. Therefore, the issue is “ownership doesn’t necessarily equate to full access” (Ojala, 2010, p. 5).

What impact does this have on libraries, and why should they care? Libraries should be able to provide unrestricted access to content that is compatible on all devices. Currently, this is not possible due to DRM. It should not matter what device you buy, or what device the students have—the library content should work on it. The ideal situation would be “to standardize DRM or get rid of it altogether, so that everyone can get along with everyone else and consumers and libraries are not forced to make this ridiculous decision” (Houghton-Jan, 2007, p. 53).

Another barrier to including e-books in the school library collection is not all learners have access to high speed Internet at home, and not all schools do either. School and public libraries will need to think outside the box to offer opportunities to help “bridge the digital divide so those without access to technology at all are not left behind” (Duncan, 2010, p. 54).

Role of the Teacher-Librarian

Many teacher-librarians believe that e-books should be a part of the school library collection, but they also recognize “integrating e-books into a collection is not all that easy” (Kaser, 2010, p. 33). Determining where to access e-books, budget concerns, the availability of technical and professional support, the desire for a standard e-book format, and finding the time in already busy schedules are all issues facing teacher-librarians. Henry Jenkins, Director of the

Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT proposed “to shift the conversation about the digital divide from questions of technological access to those of opportunities to participate and to develop the cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006, p. 4).

E-books have the potential to uncover a wide range of new teaching and learning strategies that align with current research, curricula, critical thinking, and other 21st century skills. Teacher-librarians play a pivotal role in assisting teachers to meet the needs of their students in increasingly diverse learning environments, and to provide a range of resources to support student learning. To accomplish this, teacher-librarians must “stay abreast of education research, school curriculum, priorities, changing emphases in curriculum, classroom practices and needs, and the students’ abilities and learning styles” (Zmuda & Harada, 2008, p. 103). As e-books continue to make their way into school libraries, student devices, and classrooms, it is important to realize they bring a new level of engagement to education, and are another way to ensure success for all of our students.

Conclusion

After examining the advantages, challenges, and barriers of e-books as part of the school library collection, it appears there are more questions than answers. It is not a seamless process; it is complicated and messy. What is our role as teacher-librarians during this murky and uncertain time? Do we sit back and wait for it to sort itself out? Absolutely not. Something fundamental is happening to books and reading and “libraries need to be part of this reading revolution, supporting and defending the rights of digital readers, experimenting with new reader services, collecting new genres and media formats and providing access for all readers” (Duncan, 2010, p. 54).

As teacher-librarians, we should encourage and experiment with reading digitally, but most importantly we must move beyond seeing our libraries as collections because “libraries are about knowledge and facilitation, not artifacts and stuff” (Lankes, 2010, p. 33). In the future, books will continue to change, and our libraries may look different. What will be important is not the container of the books, but how teacher-librarians can provide and can connect

readers with knowledge and facilitate the kind of “true learning that happens when books and friends, writing and understanding intermingle in a rich soup of participation” (Lankes, 2010, p. 34). In the meantime, the future is bright for e-books, so get started today and start envisioning what e-books should be able to do, and how that might impact student learning and the future of libraries.

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