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# The Learning Potential of e-Books

*Built-in dictionaries, audio support, and other features make e-books a valuable addition to literacy instruction.*

**Lotta Larson**

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**E**ight years ago, when I first began helping schools incorporate e-book reading into their curriculums, students were bound to desktop computers, and electronic books for kids were scarce. Today, there is a limitless supply of e-book titles, and advancements in e-book technologies allow for a portable and interactive reading experience. Improvements in technology, coupled with falling prices and a greater supply of books, have prompted a rise in e-book reading among kids. In fact, last year, 60 percent of all school-age children reported having read an e-book. Although most e-books are read at home, e-book reading at school nearly doubled in the last two years, from 12 to 21 percent (Scholastic, 2015).

Although there is still much to learn about the potential of e-books for schools, it is clear that effective e-book implementation can enhance students' literacy experiences (Larson, 2010; Moyer, 2012). But it is not enough to simply place digital reading devices in the hands of students and expect

reading scores to improve. Readers need to be strategic in their use of e-books and their many features. To do so, they need effective reading instruction (Dalton, 2014; Larson, 2013). Let's examine how e-books and digital reading devices can effectively support literacy learning.

## **Customizing the Reading Experience**

Perhaps the greatest advantage of e-books is the ability to differentiate literacy instruction for all learners. Students who struggle with reading or who have visual impairments may opt for a larger font or change the contrasting colors of font and screen. Students may also adjust page orientation, background, typeface, line spacing, or margin size to best accommodate their needs and preferences.

In addition, many e-books feature text-to-speech or professional audio narration, note-taking tools, dictionary support, and translation. These can be particularly helpful for English language learners. Teachers play a crucial role in helping students determine how to apply these tools and features to best



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suit their individual learning needs (Dobler, 2015).

A few years ago, I worked with a 5th grade classroom in which each student was given an e-reader loaded with books of varying reading levels. All titles were also available in print, providing students with a choice. When interviewing students about their reading preferences, I learned that struggling readers were the strongest advocates of e-books, suggesting that e-books helped them gain confidence in their reading abilities.

Students who normally would feel intimidated by a book's volume reported feeling less overwhelmed because they focused only on the text on the screen immediately before them, rather than on the seemingly

experience. To learn more about how students can use e-books to become strategic readers, access the lesson plan "Going Digital: Using e-Book Readers to Enhance the Reading Experience" at [www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/going-digital-using-book-30623.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/going-digital-using-book-30623.html).

### **Developing Fluency and Vocabulary**

Reading aloud to students has long been recognized as important to developing vocabulary and reading fluency. Students may reap similar rewards by accessing the audio features embedded in many e-books. Particularly well-documented are the benefits of audio support for students with special needs or young readers still acquiring basic

by modeling fluent pronunciation and attention to proper punctuation and cadence (Gander, 2013; Moyer, 2012).

For struggling readers or English language learners, audio support is useful for introducing new vocabulary and for modeling fluent reading (Serafini, 2004). Moreover, the combined experience of listening and reading offers students who are reading below grade level a chance to interact with grade-level texts without concerns about fluency or decoding issues (Dalton, 2014). For advanced readers, combining e-book reading with audiobook listening will compel them to slow down and listen to every single word, preventing skimming of the text (Grover & Hannegan, 2012).

Recently, I worked with a 6th grade teacher and his students as they integrated immersion reading into their literacy curriculum. The students strategically accelerated or decelerated the narration speed and adjusted the font size of the digital text to support their individual needs (Larson, in press). They also used immersion reading to help them pronounce unfamiliar words, often in combination with the built-in dictionary. Katie, a reluctant reader, explained, "Sometimes I had trouble pronouncing a word, so I used the audio so I could listen to the word, and I used the dictionary so I could know the meaning of the word."

Two-thirds of the class listened to the audio recording for more than half of the book, but five students opted to read the e-book without audio support. According to Carlos, an avid reader, "the voice was distracting and [the narrator] didn't sound the way I read in my head." His comment emphasizes the need for autonomy as students decide which e-book tools are the most beneficial for them.

Many digital reading devices have a built-in dictionary, which makes the process of looking up words both convenient and effortless. In some cases, links to images, multimedia represen-

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insurmountable number of unread pages. One struggling reader, who often compared his thin leveled books with a classmate's thick Harry Potter books, explained, "On the Kindle, nobody else knows what I'm reading and that I'm a slow reader." To this 5th grader, the privacy of e-book reading came as a relief (Larson, 2013).

Easy access to a wide assortment of books is essential. With a few simple clicks, thousands of e-books for children and young adults are available for instant download. If a student finds a book uninspiring or too difficult, it's easy to change titles. Ideally, teachers and students can select books that suit diverse interests and academic needs.

In short, e-book reading can level the playing field as students strategically customize their own reading

skills (Biancarosa & Griffiths, 2012).

Audio features in e-books come in many forms, including professional narration, a far cry from early text-to-speech options featuring a computer-generated, robotic voice. A relatively recent advancement in e-book technology is what Amazon refers to as "immersion reading," in which professional narration is synchronized with a digital text. Currently, immersion reading is available on Kindle Fire HD and Android devices. If both e-book and audiobook versions of the same text are downloaded to the device, the text can be highlighted in the e-book while students listen to the audiobook. Recorded audiobooks, which often feature the author's own voice, well-known actors, or professional narrators, may offer an additional benefit

## Tips for Successful e-Book Implementation

**1. Get started.** Tablet and e-book readers range in price and capabilities. Consider cost, compatibility with current classroom technologies, and plans for maintenance and upkeep. How will the devices be used? What kinds of tools and features do you want? Will students be able to access, create, and share multimodal content on the Internet? What types of e-books will you acquire?

If students are allowed to take their devices home, consider asking parents and students to sign user agreements that clearly explain expectations and responsibilities for technology use. Ask yourself, who can use the device outside school? (Student only? Parents? Siblings?) May parents purchase and download additional books for their child? Can students use the device to access the Internet or download apps for personal use? Make expectations clear, but be flexible and adjust as needed.



**2. Plan and support.** Students need careful guidance in becoming strategic e-book readers. Hence, teachers need time and support to develop new lesson plans and consider ways to effectively use e-books to meet instructional goals and education standards. Administrators can help by offering extra planning time; uncovering opportunities for professional development; and providing resources, including technical assistance. Scheduling times for teachers to share and discuss their experiences with colleagues is also important.

**3. Purchase and download e-books.** Teachers and students feel frustrated when they have devices with a very limited number of books. One of the main benefits of e-book reading is the opportunity to quickly access books that meet individual students' needs. It is important that teachers, administrators, and technology staff develop and agree on a sensible process for purchasing and downloading books.

Begin by asking a few basic questions: Who can purchase books? Does each classroom, student, or teacher have a budget? How will books be downloaded and accessed? Will district firewalls block e-book downloads?

**4. Select quality e-books.** Not all e-books are created equal. When selecting e-books, it pays to be an informed consumer. Look for e-books with tools and features that support literacy learning (for example, dictionary, audio support, highlighting and note-taking tools). Consider multimodal content, such as hyperlinks, animation, and video. These tools can be helpful in supporting comprehension, but be aware of interactive features that appear motivating but have little or no connection to the text.

Elizabeth Dobler's blog post "Let the Reader Beware: Evaluating Digital Books," which includes a

rubric for evaluating e-books, is an excellent resource (<http://literacybeat.com/2013/01/30/let-the-reader-beware-evaluating-digital-books>).

**5. Consider the extras.** Also consider any accessories or resources you may need. If your e-books will be equipped with audio support, you will likely want a set of headphones for each device. Each device also needs to be properly protected. If the budget does not allow for protective cases, simple (and inexpensive) 6 x 9.25 inch bubble envelopes work well.

Some e-readers come with chargers; others do not. Create a charging station using power strips and shoebox-size containers that hold multiple devices. Decide who is responsible for charging the devices. In some schools, students are responsible for charging their devices at home every night and bringing them fully charged the next morning.

tations, language translations, online resources, and audio pronunciation may also be available.

During a visit to a 2nd grade classroom, I observed students looking up words from their weekly vocabulary list while reading a Junie B. Jones book on their e-readers. The room was buzzing with excitement, despite what

I presumed to be a daunting task for many 2nd graders. Immediately after looking up a word, students inserted a digital note paraphrasing the definition or providing examples of the word's meaning. Students later gathered in small groups and enthusiastically discussed their digital notes. The teacher told me that she had never, in more

than 20 years of teaching, had students reveling in dictionary tasks, but now "they look up words all the time, and they love to share their digital notes with one another." The e-book format made vocabulary instruction exciting (Larson, 2012).

For more ideas on how to use the e-book dictionary to support vocab-

ulary learning, see the lesson plan “Digital Word Detectives: Building Vocabulary with e-Book Readers” at [www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/digital-word-detectives-building-30838.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/digital-word-detectives-building-30838.html).

### Interacting with the Text

Most e-books enable students to annotate passages or compose digital notes that document their responses as they read (Dwyer & Larson, 2014; Larson, 2010). In school-owned print books, students are often not allowed to add notes or highlight passages; but in e-books, such actions should be not only permissible but also encouraged.

Students can use e-book note-taking tools to compose an alternate ending to a story, summarize supporting details and ideas, or offer interpretations and analysis of text. Teacher-created prompts can initially guide student responses. As students become more familiar with response writing, they require fewer guidelines.

By accessing students’ markups and notes, teachers get a glimpse into each reader’s mind. Knowing what students understand, question, and respond to while reading helps teachers assess comprehension and plan subsequent lessons (Larson, 2010).

The lesson plan “e-Book Reading and Response: Innovative Ways to Engage with Texts” ([www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/book-reading-response-innovative-30670.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/book-reading-response-innovative-30670.html)) offers additional ideas on how students can use e-book note-taking tools to respond to and interact with text.

### Not a Replacement

But what about “real” books? Won’t students miss turning pages, “hugging” books, and browsing through stacks in the library? These are valid questions, often posed by concerned educators who love literature and want to instill a passion for reading in their students. I, too, love curling up with a book and

## A Student View

### Better Classroom Discussions

In English, our teacher had us use an online classroom to hold a group discussion about poetry and possible motifs for specific poems. We used our cell phones to comment. The discussion began strictly online but once everyone saw what everyone had to say, it became a lively and compelling frontchannel discussion. More kids participated because the shyer and quieter kids felt this was a comfortable place to express their opinions. Because more students participated in the discussion than usual, there was a greater variety of opinion. I contributed more to the discussion than I usually do because I felt I didn’t have to fight to be heard.

—Rebecca Hogarth, 11th grade, South Lakes High School, Reston, Virginia

will forever treasure trips to the library and favorite bookstores.

Electronic books are not meant to replace traditional books, but it is crucial for students to become proficient readers of many different forms of text. Consequently, educators need to understand how to effectively integrate e-book technologies into education settings. In addition, e-books offer boundless opportunities for differentiating literacy instruction and customizing the reading experience to help all of our students become successful and confident readers. ■

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