The experience of reading: exploring format

Susan La Marca
Genazzano FCJ College
301 Cotham Road, Kew, Australia
susan.lamarca@genazzano.vic.edu.au

Abstract

This paper describes an action research project conducted in 2013 that questioned 262 students from years 5 to 10 about their use of eBooks and audio books for pleasure reading. The students' responses demonstrated a strong preference for paper over digital versions of texts, a range of interesting feedback about their experiences with digital formats and their preferences for different formats in light of different types of reading needs. The responses also included a range of advantages and disadvantages, as perceived by the respondents, of the different formats. The survey responses, in line with current research, indicate value in exploring how readers respond to format types – the importance of format should not go unacknowledged, as it is clear that the interaction of the reader with format is complex. This paper considers the important areas of comprehension, concentration, eye strain the impact of format on our senses and the need for adequate support.

Keywords: eBooks, Reading, Format, Comprehension

Background

Genazzano FCJ College is a Catholic day and boarding school for girls in Melbourne, Australia. The college offers education, starting from the Early Learning Centre, for three and four year olds, up to university entrance at year 12, for approximately 1200 students. The college has three libraries catering for this community, offering excellent collections in all formats and a broad and successful range of library programs in well-staffed, interesting library spaces.

In 2013, library staff were part of a Leading Learning team created for the college's internal professional development program. Mr. Robert Tassoni Deputy Principal - Curriculum, Standards and Innovation, instigated a Leading Learning team approach to our professional development for that year. The program was designed to allow teams to investigate areas of interest to the teaching staff that impacted upon the learning of our students. The library had recently added a new eBook and audio book collection to our range of offerings for our students and we were keen to explore, through the Leading Learning team approach, how the students were responding to the new format. The project also included an analysis of the science etextbooks in wide use across the science curriculum, but that aspect of the project will not be addressed in this paper.

Survey Structure

The team, made up of a variety of college staff, worked together to create a simple survey for students from years five to ten. All of these students had been introduced in their ROAD (Reading Opens All Doors) (La Marca, Hardinge & Pucius, 2011) reading classes, during the previous six months, to the eBook and audio book platform. They had been shown how to access the collection and encouraged to consider it as one of their reading for pleasure options. A questionnaire, created using Survey Monkey, was given to all students and they were given time to fill in the survey.   We received the responses of 262 students from years 5 (10 year olds) to year 10 (16 year olds) to all 10 questions. The questions ranged from simple yes/no and ABC option questions, to open ended questions allowing for thoughtful, lengthy responses.

Our aim was to investigate the usage of eBooks for pleasure reading in our school environment in order to inform our provision of the current platform and better facilitate good reading experiences for our students. The platform we were interrogating was Overdrive. It must be noted, therefore, that this discussion does not refer to interactive eBooks but only to standard text-based eBooks and audio book formats.

Student comments in the survey were both illuminating and insightful and offer us a view of one school's experience. Whilst they reflect a range of interesting issues that can be explored in a wider context, extrapolation from the findings of this brief investigation to other communities of readers may be problematic.

Students as readers

In response to the question 'What kind of pleasure reader do you consider yourself to be?' over 35% of students claimed to read regularly while 18% claimed to 'read every chance I get'. These are very pleasing statistics. Only 15% claimed to read rarely while the remaining 32% said they read occasionally. These statistics indicate that within the school community, the majority of students see themselves as readers, with many making reading a regular part of their pleasure pursuits. This is evident in the enthusiasm with which the majority of students approach their reading in ROAD classes and at other times. The college runs seven co-curricular book clubs and circulates over 25,000 items a year in support of all areas of the college's reading and research activities. Genazzano is proudly an active, committed community of readers and this must be noted when considering the following discussion of reading habits and formats.

When given the prompt 'I am most interested in accessing stories in…', the options of print, eBook, and audio books, the responses were overwhelming. 11% of students said their preference was eBooks, 5% preferred audio above the other options whilst an overwhelming 89% of students claimed to prefer accessing stories in print books. Whilst this indicates a distinct preference for print books, one limitation of this question is that it does not acknowledge that those who prefer print may still enjoy eBook and audio on particular occasions. Recent American research conducted by Scholastic Inc., found that:

> "While the percentage of children who have read an eBook has increased across all age groups since 2010 (25% vs. 61%), the majority of children who have read an eBook say most of the books they read are in print (77%)."
> (Scholastic Inc, 2015, page 7)

This clearly indicates that many readers, possibly the most voracious readers, read across all formats depending on need. Our brief survey did not allow for a similar breakdown but it is likely that amongst our 83% who claim to prefer print we would have found students who also read eBooks or listened to audio too, on occasion.

Why eBooks?
A large part of our survey explored why readers favored the various formats.   57% of students felt eBooks and audio books would help them "read, view and listen to books more often". From this, we found that 29% recognized that eBooks would be preferable if travelling on a long trip, 14% felt they would be useful while travelling on public transport and 16% felt the format would improve their general pleasure in the reading experience. Interestingly, 39% claimed there were no circumstances under which they would prefer an eBook. It appears that, amongst our student population, we have a large contingent that see little value in the format even for the reasons that are generally touted as positive by the format's promoters and those who appreciate what it can offer to readers.
The different features offered by eBooks that appealed most to students were:
- 53% liked that they did not have to worry about returning to book. (Overdrive has a pre-set return date – the book disappears from the device after two weeks)
- 50% liked that they could access the book anywhere, anytime.
- 41% appreciated that they could read on any device.
- 28% liked that they didn't lose their place in the book.
- 27% liked that they could alter the size of the font.

Amongst those students who had read eBooks or audio books, how they had accessed the format was of great interest to our library service. We found that over 46% of those students who had read an eBook had accessed it on the Internet. In the main, these books fall into the category of fan fiction. In most cases the fan fiction being read is unpublished works that respond, in tribute, to current, popular titles. Anecdotally, it can be stated that this is an increasingly popular reading option for our teenage, girl readers. This is not the only option online that makes up this 46%. More investigation would be needed to discern exactly what material these students are accessing, as this was not part of our survey. 34% borrowed the eBook from our own school library system, while 27% had purchased the eBook and 12 % had borrowed the eBook from a public library eBook platform.

Issues with use of eBooks
When asked why they had not borrowed an eBook almost 64% of students said it was because they were not interested in eBooks as a reading option. 23% could not find anything in the eBook/audio library offered by the school that they wanted to read, and15% did not have a suitable device. Another 12% had experienced technical difficulties and a further 12% had trouble with the instructions for use.
It must be noted that the system was not introduced until all students across the college had access to a laptop computer through the school. It was decided that, from an equity standpoint, we could not offer a program that could only be accessed by those who had a device of their own. Therefore, it was not until the schools laptop program had completed its rollout that the audio book and eBook library was added to our library service. The students who felt they did not have a suitable device felt that reading on a laptop was not satisfactory.

These students were keen to read on a tablet, but they felt the laptop offered a lesser experience that did not interest them.

The technical difficulties referred to by 12% of students related to the slowness of Internet connection, on occasion, through the school network or a lack of adequate Internet connection at home. Our college connection has been strengthened recently and it would be interesting to see if this improvement changes students' experiences and perceptions. Such feedback, though, indicates an area worthy of investigation for those considering implementing an eBook/audio book platform.

The 23% of students who claimed to not be able to find anything of interest to read in our library is another response worthy of note. We have worked hard to select books for our eBook/audio book collection that are of interest to our students. We have built up a library of approximately 600 titles and are continually adding to our list. We have found, though, that a large number of the titles we would like to purchase are currently not available on the platform. In particular, we have found that titles by Australian authors are not readily available, severely limiting our choice. Whilst all companies claim to offer many thousands of titles, their lists do not always include the range of titles desired by our readers. We assume that this is an issue that will be addressed over time but it is important that we acknowledge that not all print titles are available as eBooks or audio books yet. We, and our student readers, exist within a period of exciting growth and change, but there is no doubt that, currently, the greatest variety is still only available in print. Shank (2012) in her article 'Pew Survey Shows How EBooks are Changing the Equation for Publishers, Readers' argues that we are in a period where the power is shifting due to digital publishing; that readers have the ability to move between offerings like never before and that digital publishing is keeping material in print, and available, at unprecedented rates. While all of these arguments are valid, it cannot be stated that we have reached the point where all books are available everywhere at anytime, and this has limited what we can offer our students as a part of our eBook and audio book library.

Do you think you read differently?

One of the most fascinating sections of the survey was the responses to the question – "Compare reading an eBook to reading a traditional paper book. Do you think you read differently? Or comprehend the content differently?" I would like to discuss the responses from the students under a range of headings, in light of current commentary.

eBooks are great - "Makes the book more interesting"

Recent National Literacy Trust research from Great Britain found that "print remained the favorite medium for reading fiction for most children" (Picton, 2014). This research also found that the "proportion of children reading eBooks more than doubled between 2010 and 2012 (increasing from 5.6% in 2010 to 11.9% in 2012)" (Picton, 2014). Jabr, in his excellent overview article, The reading brain in the digital age: The science of paper versus screens for *Scientific American,* found that:

> "recent surveys suggest that although most people still prefer paper—especially when reading intensively—attitudes are changing as tablets and e-reading technology improve and reading digital books for facts and fun becomes more common. In the U.S., e-books currently make up between 15 and 20 percent of all trade book sales." (Jabr, 2013)

The most common reason for using an eBook amongst our survey respondents was the ability to read the book anywhere. Many mentioned travelling or using a tablet device or phone on public transport. Recent Pew Research Centre research found this to be a common reason for reading in the eBook format, claiming: "Those who read both eBooks and printed books prefer reading in the different formats under different circumstances" (Raine, 2014).

Our students, who preferred the eBook format, gave the following reasons:

- "Book is safe on computer and cannot be lost"
- "Don't have to remember to bring it to school"
- "You can bookmark points easily"
- "Use on multiple devices"
- "Switch easily between activities on a computer"
- "Multiple books on one device"
- "Good use of (school) laptop"
- "When I read on my iPod the pages are smaller, so it is easier to comprehend"
- "I don't think about how thick or thin a book is" (on an eBook)
- "If it is audio I would enjoy it more as I can hear the voice of the person"
- "I read more (in eBook format) because I am more adjusted to the computer screen."
- "You can make the font bigger"
- "There is less chance of losing your page"
- "I may just read more often because it is easier to carry."
- "It is easier to read when you don't need to hold the book open or you can search in the book if you want to re-read a part of the book"

One response not given in our survey that does appear in the wider research is worthy of mention. Picton, for the National Literacy Trust in Great Britain, found that one reason for preferring the format was the "privacy" that the ereader device offered (Picton, 2014, p. 9). Picton suggested that those who were reading below their reading age particularly appreciated that fellow students could not discern what they were reading when using a device, lessening their embarrassment at not being as proficient at reading as their peers. Whilst respondents in our small survey did not mention this, it is an observation worthy of note for school library and classroom practitioners as it suggests that the eBook format may have a place when working to encourage reluctant readers.

Paper Rules - 'It's fun to have a normal book.'
Our survey indicated a clear preference for print over eBook or audio format amongst our students. This mirrored other more structured research findings from around the world. The recent Scholastic research from the US found: "Nearly two-thirds of children (65%) - up from 2012 (60%) - agree that they'll always want to read books in print even through there are eBooks available" (Scholastic Inc., 2015, p. 7).

Jabr, in his synthesis of current research, found a range of similar findings:

"In a 2011 survey of graduate students at National Taiwan University, the majority reported browsing a few paragraphs online before printing out the

whole text for more in-depth reading. A 2008 survey of millennials (people born between 1980 and the early 2000s) at Salve Regina University in Rhode Island concluded that, 'when it comes to reading a book, even they prefer good, old-fashioned print'. And in a 2003 study conducted at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, nearly 80 percent of 687 surveyed students preferred to read text on paper as opposed to on a screen in order to 'understand it with clarity'." (Jabr, 2013)

The following comments are representative of students' reasons for preferring print over eBook or audio format.
- "can make notes and use sticky notes with a print book."
- "I can understand content of a book better if it is in print"
- "I don't believe everything should be in a technology form"
- "eBooks do not appeal to me at all"
- "Having print is easier"
- "eBooks are complicated and annoying"

In the main, many students found it difficult to articulate why they preferred paper for their reading experiences. Whilst they confidently said they preferred paper, they could not always explain why. More in-depth questioning and careful analysis would be needed to tease out the likely complex reasons for their strongly held opinions. The most often stated reasons from our survey are discussed in subsequent sections.
Sun, in a recent article for *SLJ,* titled 'EBooks take hold in schools – slowly', suggested that:

"The slow growth of eBooks adoption in typical school libraries is attributed to limited access to ereading devices and cost of eBooks, …Low eBook usage is also due to user preference for print books, lack of student awareness of eBooks availability, and lack of training about the downloading process." (Sun, 2014)

These are all valid comments that need to be considered in what is a very complex scenario of interacting factors.

Physical responses – "When I read an ebook my eyes become watery."
Jeong (2012) found that: "Regarding eye fatigue, students had significantly greater eye fatigue after reading e-books than after reading p-books". This finding was borne out in the comments from our survey. A sample of student comments on this issue is listed here:

- "it is bad for my eyes if I am constantly reading off the device."
- "I can't read for as long because I'm looking at a screen and it's sometimes harder to see."
- "I read differently because my eyes get sore quickly so I read less."
- "I wouldn't read as much on an eBook because my eyes hurt after looking at the screen for too long."
- "because it is on a bright screen and I find it harder to understand it and comprehend it than in print."

- "I don't always enjoy it as much and when reading for a long time it can start to hurt my eyes"
- "Yeah, it's hard to concentrate on a screen. It's bad for your eyes. And I read a lot... "
- "Since I have trouble seeing and reading digital screens I prefer normal paper books"
- "In my opinion, I enjoy reading a print book better because when I read an eBook my eyes become watery."
- "I think that is more difficult to read a eBook because I don't like how the screen is so bright on the devices and because of the brightness it hurts my eyes."

In an education system that increasingly relies upon the use of screens for various activities, these findings are noteworthy.

The haptics of paper books - "I prefer real books"

Jabr (2013) refers to the "physicality in reading" and goes on to claim that:

> "evidence from laboratory experiments, polls and consumer reports indicates that modern screens and e-readers fail to adequately recreate certain tactile experiences of reading on paper that many people miss and, more importantly, prevent people from navigating long texts in an intuitive and satisfying way." (Jabr, 2013)

Paul (2014) discusses the "satisfaction of the senses." And claims:

> "The smooth feel of paper and the rich colors of illustrations are largely lost in eBook reproductions. The distinctiveness of the reading experience is reduced, as well – such as when an oversized picture book is squeezed down to the size of an ereader screen." (Paul, 2014)

In undertaking our survey, we had not expected children and young adults, our respondents from the ages of ten to sixteen years, to agree with these views. The students had grown up with screens. Surely they would not prefer paper for the sensory pleasure it offered! These are some of their comments about the physical nature of the book and its appeal:

- "I like the feel of paper between my fingers"
- "I would much rather have a real print book in front of me. We use electronics already in society way too much. It is good for teenagers to have a break from technology and read a hard copy book."
- "I like the smell and feel of a real book"
- "I cannot feel the pages."
- "I think books are more captivating and there are less distractions because it keeps you interested and I like turning the pages. Reading a hard copy feels more authentic."

Many decades ago, McLuhan (1964) told us that 'the medium is the message". He was not referring to the different formats of books but the statement appears to hold true; there is no doubt that format does affect the "message" and our overall reading experience. The feel of a book, its impact on all of our senses, is something we have not valued highly or acknowledged. It is definitely part of the "old-fashioned" reading experience that cannot be easily replicated. The physical nature of the book not only affects our senses but also the cues we are given as to how to progress through the text. Picton notes "…technology is unlikely to solve the problem of the tactile cues provided by the build up of physical paper pages read." (Picton, 2014, p. 15)

Comprehension – "I don't process the information as well.."

Lam and fellow researchers found in their exploration of eBooks that: "…students indicated that eBooks are not yet a useful and practical tool for academic learning. Enjoyment of the eBook reading process was not high. Comprehension of digital text was also found to be challenging" **(**Lam et. al., 2009). This is not an uncommon finding. Jabr, in his overview, found "At least a few studies suggest that by limiting the way people navigate texts, screens impair comprehension (Jabr, 2013). Jeong (2012) found that "pbooks appear to enable better reading comprehension". One of the most quoted recent research papers, by Mangen, Walgermo and Bronnick (2013), found that "reading linear narrative and expository texts on a computer screen leads to poorer reading comprehension than reading the same texts on paper." (page 67)

These findings were borne out in the responses of our surveyed students:

- "I think it's much better reading and comprehending reading from an actual print book and you also get a different but better feeling from reading from a printed book. So, I don't really like eBooks as much."
- "I think less about what I am reading (on an eBook)"
- "I don't get into the books as easily (in eBook)"
- "Personally I find reading on a device harder to concentrate, as it looks very bland. I find books hard-copy better."
- "I definitely prefer to read print books. I am less engaged, I find, when, if ever, I read an eBook."
- "I believe it is harder to read on an eBook"
- "I find I tend to skip paragraphs without realizing it."
- "I do not concentrate or pay as much attention to an eBook as I do to a print book. This will seriously hinder my learning if the school changes to eBooks."

What this means for educators requires lengthy investigation. We take for granted the use of varied screens in today's educational climate without really considering what this means for our students and their comprehension of a given text. Assisting young people navigate the world of screens in a meaningful way is important. To do this we need to better understand how we interact with not only eBooks as a format but all of the varied screen formats that we read. The way we interact with text in various formats is a complex interplay of many factors, not least of which is our own perception - "Whether they realize it or not, many people approach computers and tablets with a state of mind less conducive to learning than the one they bring to paper" (Jabr, 2013).

Distractions of format and connection to Internet

Only a small number of students in our limited survey commented on the distraction of the Internet or the distractions offered by the functions of eBook technology and how these factors impacted upon their reading. Comments such as this were noted:

- "reading an eBook can easily distract students"
- "I also think that the computer or phone carries more distractions than a hard copy."

Format/Function of eBook – "It is more confusing, annoying…"

Research on electronic textbooks stresses the importance of "personal and technical readiness" (Kropman et. al., 2004). There is a sense amongst some of our survey respondents that they are somewhat unready for the experience of a different, or new, format

for their reading. Some certainly seem disengaged by the small amounts of technical knowledge they need to navigate the platform, while others appear to feel "safer" with a trusted format that they are familiar with. Students gave the following responses:

- "I think I read slower because I have to turn the page and make sure that I have only turned one page, not 5!"
- "It is more confusing, annoying and I would much rather a print book"
- "I think that it is better reading a paperback because you can also look at the blurb, front cover of the book and read whenever you want to, not just when your device has charge."
- "You would find it harder to understand because you wouldn't be able to look back with ease"
- "Computers always have problems"

Jabr (2013) noted that "surveys indicate that screens and e-readers interfere with two other important aspects of navigating texts: serendipity and a sense of control" and that reading on paper makes "it easier to form a coherent mental map of the text" (Jabr, 2013). These findings help explain the responses from our survey where students feel unsure of the medium and have difficulty finding their way around a text in its eBook format.
The NSW Curriculum and Learning Innovation Centre (2012), in their work on eBooks, found that "the readiness and training support provided at commencement contributed to… successful use." This indicates the importance of adequate training in the use of even the simplest platforms and devices. We cannot assume that all students are either knowledgeable or comfortable with new approaches. Ongoing support and backup must also be in evidence if any new platform implementation is to be successful.

Implications for our library service

The results of our survey indicated a range of areas for our attention in relation to the eBook and audio book platform that we provided for our students. We needed to recognize that not all of our students want to use the platform. Despite this, offering the platform to those who were interested is still an important part of the mix of collections that we provide our community.
Comments by some respondents made it clear that we needed to ensure adequate instruction was given to all students in using the platform. We can never assume that any collection, and how to use it effectively, is always straightforward and easy for everyone. This is a timely reminder for all of our library team to continually educate our community in many and varied ways about our collections and how to access them.
The survey results also indicated that the format in which we read is a more complicated interaction than we may ever have thought. The extent to which a format is distracting or impedes comprehension, the ways in which the format can impact on our experience of the text both good and bad and the extent to which the format affects our senses, are all of interest in our work with our students. As educators, the impact of format on learning is of prime importance and a factor that cannot be ignored as we work to continually improve the literacy abilities of our students. Wolf, in her fascinating text, *Proust and the squid: The story and science of the reading brain,* discusses in detail her concerns about how digital texts of varied kinds can impact on students' abilities to interrogate information. She says:

"we must exert our greatest efforts to ensure that immersion in digital resources does not stunt our children's capacity to evaluate, analyze, prioritize, and probe

what lies beneath any form of information. We must teach our children to be 'bitextual', or 'multitextual', able to read and analyze texts flexibly in different ways.." (Wolf, 2008, p. 226)

Wolf's comments resonate with our role as teacher librarians, reinforcing our need to understand and educate our communities about the nature of format and its impact.

Conclusions

This paper is a report on a small action research project. Despite this, it has generated from students rich and insightful responses that are both useful and intriguing. All sections of this paper would be worthy of more rigorous, structured research. Dickenson, in a recent review for the Australian Council for the Arts, claimed: "No contemporary Australian research on children's leisure reading across different formats or media could be located" (Dickenson, 2014, p. 19). Obviously, work in this area would be timely in my own country and, despite there being more complex analyses already undertaken in other countries (Scholastic, 2014; Picton, 2015; Mangen et. al, 2013), more could still be done. The discussion of format and its impact on the reading experience exists within a complex, changing world of many variables each of which is worthy of intensive investigation.

In a recent *Guardian* article, David discussed why we work so hard to encourage pleasure reading amongst our students and why we search to find platforms and formats that will engage them and enrich the reading experience. She said: "Children who read for pleasure have increased concentration, memory, confidence, greater self-esteem and general knowledge. Reading builds empathy, improves imagination and language development. These are important and relevant benefits, whether we live in a digital or analogue world" (David, 2013). None of this is new to those of us working in school libraries, but it is worth reiterating. These benefits that David clearly describes are best attained through what Picton calls a "mixed reading diet" (2014, p. 17), and it is for this reason that we continue to offer new and different platforms and options to engage each and every reader. Adequate research into how these platforms interact with, and are used by, readers is of utmost importance if we are fully support each and every community of readers.

This paper has described what has proven to be a very valuable learning experience for all of those in our library team. It has enabled us to interrogate one of our collections and learn a great deal about its impact on our students. It has also encouraged us to think more deeply about format and the important role it plays in the reading experience. The final word, though, belongs to a wise and insightful year six student who, in response to one of our questions, claimed: "I don't think it matters how you read a book as long as you LOVE reading."

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Biographical note

Dr Susan La Marca is Head of Library and Information Services at Genazzano FCJ College in Melbourne and the editor of *Synergy*, for School Library Association of Victoria. Her PhD, thesis, completed in 2004, analyzed the factors that contribute to the creation of a reading environment in secondary school libraries. Susan has edited a number of texts in the field of teacher-librarianship on reading and library design including *Back to Books: Creating a Focus on Fiction* (1999), *Rethink: Ideas for Inspiring School Library Design* (2007). Susan is the co-author with Dr Pam Macintyre of *Knowing Readers: Unlocking the Pleasures of Reading* (SLAV, 2006) and wrote the book *Designing the Learning Environment* (ACER, 2010). Susan is also co-editor of the short story anthology *Things a Map Wont Show You* (Penguin Books, 2012).