

Future of the book? Challenge of the digital world

Pat Pledger

Pledger Consulting, PO Box 173, Kangarilla. SA. 5157, Australia www.readplus.com.au Email patricia.pledger@bigpond.com

Abstract

In the last ten years there has been much speculation about the role of e-books and e-book readers. This paper will look at the impact of e-book readers on publishing and reading, the types of e-book readers, their advantages and disadvantages. Some ideas for future e-books and e-book readers and their use in the library and classroom will be discussed, as will the skills that are needed to read e-books. The future of the printed book will be discussed.

Introduction

While the future of e-books and e-book readers looked rosy in 2001 (Pledger, 2003) it has taken ten years for them to become a part of regular press speculation and for personal ownership of e-book readers to become a reality in Australia. The availability of e-books and e-book reading devices means that they are becoming an alternative format to print books. There are many advantages and disadvantages to reading books on e-book readers and it appears that they may have benefits for reluctant readers and in the classroom. However traditional reading skills are still essential and will need to be taught. Students reading e-books online will also need the skills of collaboration and social networking. Results of a survey carried out with 97 secondary school students will be discussed.

Availability of e-books

E-books have always been available on the World Wide Web. Sites such as Project Gutenberg (Project Gutenberg 2010) have long offered over 30,000 free, out of print books to the general public. In addition, publishers and authors like Neil Gaiman, Cory Doctorow and J.K. Rowling are offering free e-books to entice readers to purchase further books in a series. The popularity of these e-book readers and improved technology, especially with the iPad, is also enticing publishers to make more books available in a digital format. For example Penguin has iPhone and iPad apps for the ever popular Beatrix Potter books and Dr Seuss' *The cat in the hat* is also available in a digital format (Harper, 2010).

Types of e-book readers

There has been an expansion of reading in a digital form with the release of affordable e-book readers that are easy to handle and to read books on. The advent of the Amazon Kindle heralded a new era in e-books readers. It is designed to look like a paperback book and the use of e-ink made the print easy to read. Sony also has an e-book reader, and Barnes and Noble Bookstore has the Nook. In Australia, Borders has launched the Kobo, which has access to more than 2 million books (Singer, 2010). The iPad with its colour, interactivity and apps and the iPhone, where a user can download e-book reader app to read books, also provide easy access to e-books. There is a Kindle and Kobo app for both the iPad and the iPhone. A search on Wikipedia provides a useful comparison of the different types of e-book readers available (Wikipedia 2010).

Advantages of reading e-books on e-book readers

Unlike reading an e-book on your computer, where e-mail and sidebars can be a distraction, the dedicated e-book reader offers a similar experience to reading a book but with some notable advantages. For example the Amazon Kindle has a number of useful features. The audio function allows the user to hear the text as it is read. There is a dictionary to look up unknown words and the ability to take notes. A bookmark function is available. Amazon will convert pdf files into a file for the Kindle. It can be stored on your computer and then transferred into the documents folder of the Kindle.

Having almost instantaneous access to new books and free books is another advantage of storing your books on an e-book reader. Books can be downloaded in a few seconds. The low cost of the e-book is also an

advantage, many being around \$10 US and publishers are beginning to offer the first book in a series free in the hope that the reader will buy the newly published sequels. Sample chapters can also be downloaded to get a taste of the book before it is purchased. The ability to synchronise the book on the Kindle and read it on several devices, e.g. Kindle, PC and the iPhone is a useful feature.

Perhaps the most useful feature of the e-book reader is the ability to change the size of the font. This is a boon for people with poor eyesight, but there is also evidence that larger font size helps the developing reader to decode the words. As children age, then they are better able to deal with small print. In addition, children and many adults like to use the largest font because they can read faster. Dyslexic readers also find reading on an e-book reader a better experience as the problem with crowding of letters disappears. (DeLamater, 2010)

The portability of the e-book reader is another benefit. The reader can carry around numerous books in one small device. The Kindle can hold about 200 books at a time and this is a boon for avid readers who like to have several books at their fingertips and for travellers who can't afford to carry numerous books in their luggage. Access to thousands of free books that are out of copyright, including classics, is another desirable aspect of owning a personal library on an e-book reader. The idea of having multiple books available was a reason for one student to use an e-book reader. Another student read more than one book at a time and thought this would be easier on an e-book reader.

The interactive ability that can be found on the iPad may well revolutionise books for young readers. Not only will they be able to read the book in colour on the iPad but also there will be interactive games, colouring pages and the ability to make up stories (Harper, 2010).

Disadvantages of e-book readers

One of the major disadvantages of the e-book reader is that the reader can't lend a book from one device to another. For example members of my book group used to regularly bring paperback books they had read and lend them to other members. Now that the majority of us have e-book readers this book lending has decreased considerably.

As well, at this stage it is impossible to swap a book from one device to another. If a book is bought from Amazon then it can only be read on a Kindle. If it is purchased from Borders then it has to be read on the Kobo. However most e-book readers allow the purchased book to be downloaded to and read on a PC, Mac or iPad but this is not as convenient as having a universal e-book reader that will take books from any platform. Although the standard for e-book readers is e-pub, the vendors of e-book readers have tended to be large booksellers who want the client to buy exclusively from them. The inability to access books across platforms is a major disadvantage for purchasers of e-book readers (Stansbury, 2010).

Because of the different size fonts, the e-book reader does not have the traditional page numbers that a reader will take for granted. The Kindle for example, has its own location number instead of pages. While it does let the reader know what percentage of the book has been read, it is disconcerting not to know how many pages there are in the book and how many are still to be read. Although it is possible to bookmark the pages, it does not have the ease of making a page notation for a reference. This makes it impossible to cite the correct pages in the normal way when writing papers or reviews (Johnson, 2009).

Reading a book on an e-book reader does not yet have the useability of a paper book. The reader is unable to work out the length of a book by looking at it and cannot easily skim through the book, getting a general overview of its nature. The Kindle for example shows the book cover on the PC but not on the Kindle itself and there was no blurb to give the reader a synopsis of the book. Diagrams and illustrations are of poor quality. A study (Behler, 2009, p.58) showed that users felt that the Sony e-book readers they were trialing were not suitable for the sciences as the colour and diagrams did not show up well enough. This may change with the advent of new innovations like the iPad, which has more ability to show colour and pictures.

However it seems that students do like the idea of having textbooks and reference books on an e-book reader. 53% of the students surveyed saw the advantages of using e-book readers for their textbooks or for reference books with a further 21% thinking that maybe it would be a good idea (Fig. 1). Portability, large storage and conservation of forests were the reasons stated for the use of an e-book reader.

Would a reference book or textbook be useful on an e-book reader?

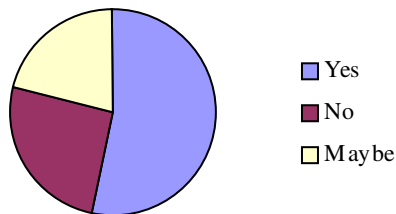


Figure 1

Although the students like the idea of having their texts on an e-book reader, studies have shown that students preferred paper textbooks. "Amazon distributed Kindle DXs to students at a number of US colleges, then solicited their feedback. What they discovered was that students don't read textbooks, they use textbooks. And a traditional hard-copy textbook is more useable — it is easier, and more intuitive, to thumb through, search, and scribble on than an e-book" (Myslewski, 2010). In another project where students used the Sony e-book reader, it was discovered that "reading is an intensively individual experience. Each person had a different take on whether they enjoyed using the Sony Reader and whether they would use one again" (Behler, 2009, p.57).

Features of future e-book readers

For future e-book readers, some features would enhance the reading experience. Top of the list would be the ability to use purchased books across reading platforms. In some devices a longer battery life, with a battery that did not have to be charged from a computer, would be desirable. For fiction books added content like author reviews, reading guides and read similar authors would be a bonus. For non-fiction study and ways to make the diagrams and pictures in textbooks more use friendly will be essential before there is a big take up of the e-reader. As they become more popular, models designed specifically for particular age groups may become popular. For young children, an easy to use reader with large buttons, good audio and large print would be ideal, while the senior reader will need devices that are easy to use, light and cater for diseases like arthritis (Joanna , 2010).

Using e-books and e-book readers in the classroom and library

There has been interest taken in the use of Kindles in the classroom. Lotta Larson, an assistant professor of elementary education has been working with children using Kindles and she has found that they will motivate readers who are not very enthusiastic about reading. The children were able to listen to the text, change the font size and take notes and these extras led to a better understanding of the book (Kansas State University, 2010).

It appears that the advantages of e-book readers, changeable font size, the dictionary access and portability, were all crucial factors that children liked when using Kindles. They thought that the dictionary helped them to learn words and to learn to read. They also liked the ability to take notes as they read. One student surveyed thought that she would use an e-book reader "for non fiction information, since it would be updated often".

The issue of lending rights for education and libraries will need to be sorted out in the future. Having students gaining access to the same material on e-book readers can be a problem for the classroom. For

example, six Kindles are allowed for one account but there is still the worry of allowing students access to the school account. This can be partly overcome by downloading the Kindle onto the PC, Mac and iPhone, thus making it possible to have the reading material in all three places at once. Ipad touches and computers can then add to the collection of Kindles. Pdfs can also be up-loaded to the Kindle (Hill, 2010). It is also possible to create e-books or a collection of resources for a unit of work and up-load these to the Kindle as well.

Martin Gray also outlines how he has linked prescribed texts in e-book format for the Higher School Certificate in the school catalogue. This allows students and teachers to have access to a quick easy link. Teachers are also able to use these links to download the texts and then use excerpts on a whiteboard as part of investigating Area of Study concepts (Gray, 2009).

Ability of people to read and understand the digital word

Literacy skills are still all important when reading online or from an e-book reader. Readers need to be able to decode the written word and to make understandings of it. As Aristotle explains there are three lives for a good society: the “first life, of productivity and knowledge gathering; the second, the life of entertainment, and the third, the life of reflection and contemplation”. Maryanne Wolf from the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts (Liu, 2010), worries that children may not be able to go beyond the decoding of words to the rich world of reflection and contemplation that can come after reading. She fears that the distraction of the peripherals when reading on line, the temptation of reading e-mails and clicking to go to other sites from the side bars, will short circuit the developing brain and not allow it to go beyond the text. Although reading speed on computers is as fast as that on the printed word, the distractions on the computer take up a great deal of time. “In one study, workers switched tasks about every three minutes and took over 23 minutes on average to return to a task” reports Sandra Aamodt, who believes that reading on the computer is a test of the user’s strength of character. (Liu, 2010) However with the use of e-readers the reader felt more immersed in the printed word, rather than reading a traditional book or on a computer.

It has been argued by Liu (Liu, 2010), professor of English at the University of California, that Web 2.0 offers a different view of reading and contains a social experience. He believes that with the advent of reading online, reading should become a place where the reader moves from focused reading to collective reading. For this to occur, readers will need to be well versed not only in decoding the written word and making sense of it, but will need to have skills in problem solving, collaborating and connecting with other people.

Will the printed book die?

With the advent of dedicated e-book readers like the Kindle and Kobo and the arrival of the iPad, there have been fears that the printed book might be phased out. However only 4% of the 97 students who were surveyed had an e-book reader. 53% of them stated that they preferred print to reading on an electronic device (Figure 2). Of the 4 students whose family had an e-book reader, 3 stated that they preferred print. One of these students who had used an e-book reader said it was because the screen hurt her eyes after a while and another liked reading in print because turning the pages was automatic. 9% of the students were quite happy to use either print or e-book readers, depending on the circumstances of their reading. Another student preferred to read in print as “paperbacks are keepsakes and I read to get away from the screen”. While several students thought that it would be ‘cool’ to have an e-book reader, another thought that there was no point “in fussing around with more useless electronics when there is nothing wrong with books”.

Print or e-book reader?

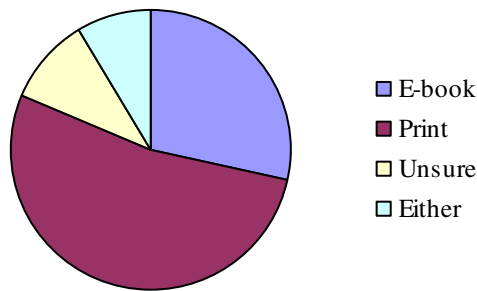


Figure 2

The content of the book itself is the object of worth. It doesn't matter what format it comes in, the role of teachers, librarians and parents is to promote a love of reading and teach the skills necessary to use both print and digital books. With 21% of the students surveyed stating that they thought they might read more if their books were stored on an e-book reader (Figure 3), it is necessary for educational professionals to keep up with the technology and to provide the opportunities for them to do this.

Would you read more if your books were stored in an e-book reader?

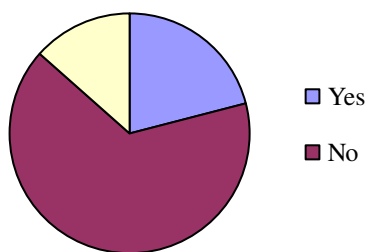


Figure 3

Conclusion

Although only 4% of the 97 students surveyed had e-book readers within their family group, more e-book devices are coming onto the market. With developers adding books to the iPad and more books becoming available in e-book form, educators will need to keep up with trends and test devices to see if they will improve the educational outcomes of their students.

Three key learnings

- E-book readers were not common in the households of the students surveyed
- Students were perceptive about the advantages and disadvantages of e-book readers and their use
- Educators need to be aware of the reading process and teach the skills of reflection and contemplation after reading

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