

The Role of Electronic Books in the Study of Literature

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This project seeks to investigate the correlation between electronic books and student performance. Books produced in electronic format and available via smart phone and portable tablets have had a major effect on the way people access and process information. With this, this research paper will identify the promising role such formats present in the classroom, and seeks to provide concrete research results that proves the validity of utilizing such devices.

Background

Electronic publishing has revolutionized the way we as consumers receive information. With the widespread use and availability of electronic publishing has come a knowledge revolution, from the birth of the internet to the availability of up-to-the-minute information that side-steps the costs and limitations of traditional paper printing. Equally great to the expanded amount of information is the convenience that electronic formats present. While this new technology has had a rising impact on the way people use books, much more attention to scholarly uses is needed.

Statement of the Problem

As with any high school English class, reading and genuine absorption of a literary text are vital both to the academic performance and intellectual growth of a student. It goes without saying that the basis of in-depth literature study begins with a thorough reading, yet this basic first step is often performed in less than optimal situations, or not at all.

It is the aim of this study therefore, to show that electronic books provide a convenience and tool set that makes texts more readily available, ensuring a more complete read, and also provides the means for deeper study and analysis.

The methods of analysis will be based on a comparison of academic performance on assignments, teacher reviews concerning in-class participation, as well as a questionnaire answered by students describing the experience of using electronic books either as a replacement or supplement to the “brick and mortar” textbooks. An attempt to eliminate the use of a hard text outright by the research group will not be performed as any possible loss in academic performance stemming from the sole use of electronic technology is unacceptable.

The population of the study will be the populations of two 9th grade English classes at St. Andrews Priory. Exact numbers of research participants has yet to be determined.

Significance of the Study

As electronic book technology is in its infancy, the great majority of educators have yet to consider the use of such technology in their classrooms. The use of such devices that allow the transmission of such books is however, widespread by the target population. This study then, in effect, is an attempt to bridge the knowledge of the teacher with the technological powers of the student. Both teacher and student stand to benefit from the results of such a study, as a sound understanding and appreciation of a work of literature is an English educator’s greatest goal.

Significantly, the target school, St. Andrews Priory, is a “laptop school,” meaning that every student is equipped with a laptop. In addition, a great number possess smart phones and/or other devices capable of displaying electronic books. Furthermore, as the literary texts used in class are primarily classics, most are available online free of charge. This availability makes

electronic books a significant option for those who have become accustomed to receiving information through computer screens and are familiar with the multitude of easy-to-access tools such as an electronic dictionary/thesaurus and copy and paste note storing.

The aim of this research, ultimately, is to expand the options for readers in hopes of increasing literacy and literary engagement.

Research Questions

The question this paper seeks to answer is whether the availability of electronic classroom texts will result in expanded academic performance. Specifically, research seeks to find if the new technology will promote more time dedicated to reading, as the average student often carries an internet-equipped device at all times, which is seldom the case for a printed classroom text. Secondly, the use of electronic tools that enhance reading and note-taking will be investigated, and the results considered.

Assumptions

It is the assumption of this researcher that a student will read more and in greater detail when the availability of a text is increased. Technology dominates our society, and even more so with youth, so the plausibility of increasing literacy by way of personal technology has great merit. The second assumption is that more options for access to classroom material will create a greater range of engagement; a number of students have claimed to hate books, but never the internet, of which a great deal is text. Literature books are cumbersome, often left at home or in lockers, while smart phones and laptop computers travel with a student, and if such a device is equipped with class materials in electronic form, then the student always has them on hand and presumably will read them.

Scope and Limitations

The limitation of this study is that the research is volunteer based. This is done for a number of reasons, the first being that only students possessing and comfortable with the technology can be used as research participants. Time and funding limitations preclude the possibility of training students unfamiliar with the use of electronic books and their corresponding tools. Secondly, other than quantifiable data such as test and essay scores, the success or failure of electronic book use is based on the opinions of the teacher as well as self-reporting by students. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges the possibility of the “researcher effect” as students may utilize the technology merely to be a part of the research or because of its novelty. However, at its least, the researcher identifies the benefit of introducing the teacher and student to new learning options and at best, hopes that the incredible array of technology that has become commonplace to society has a genuine use as a learning tool within the classroom.

Summary

With the growth of personal portable technology has come new opportunities for effective teaching in the classroom. Access to information has grown exponentially, though the cost of integrating such technology is vast, especially with the budget issues experienced nationwide. This gap is rapidly being filled by the student, as smart phones and laptops are gaining prominence. The only need then, should such technology have a place in literature study, is that the teacher become familiar with the availability and utilization of electronic material. Let it be noted that such a study is not seeking to eliminate traditional classroom materials, but offer expanded study options for students during their time out of class.

Method

Absorption of a literary text is the first step for success in a high-school English class.. It goes without saying that the basis of in-depth literature study begins with a thorough reading, yet this basic first step is often performed in less than optimal situations, or not at all. Because textbooks are cumbersome and static, this research seeks to find if the innovative technology of electronic books has a place in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover if the use of electronic books can enhance classroom learning, translating to increased academic performance. The research methods used for this are both qualitative and quantitative. Both methods are appropriate because formative assessments must be paired with standardized assessments to more accurately gauge student performance.

Variables

The independent variable for this is the electronic book device, either a laptop, cell-phone, or e-reader. Secondly, the text(s) used are independent. The dependent variable(s) is the student's reading comprehension and test scores.

Research Questions

The first question is whether or not the ability to access the text electronically results in increased reading time. This is the researcher's belief as the portability of such devices is far greater than traditional English text books. Second, do the enhanced tools included in e-readers result in greater engagement in a text, resulting in improved scores?

Intervention or Innovation

In the classroom, I plan to make texts available in electronic form in addition to traditional texts. This way, the student has more formats available to suit her needs.

Participants

The participants will be two 9th grade English classrooms. Approximately 27 students will participate in the action research project based on the results of a voluntary survey handed out in class (Appendix A). The students are all female with an average age of 14. They attend St. Andrew's Priory, a private school located in Honolulu, Hawaii.

The students are as a whole, a focused and dedicated group of students. They have expressed excitement at the idea of using non-traditional texts. Furthermore, they understand that their responsibilities during participation will not be great, further ensuring their cooperation.

Negotiations

The negotiations required to implement this plan are minimal. Permission from the teacher has been secured as well as the Priory's head information technology (IT) employee. As the school is private, further negotiations are not required.

Timeline

Following the initial questionnaire, students will read a section of their classroom material via an electronic device. Book one of the Odyssey is the target work, followed by book three to ensure consistent results and in anticipation of any hang-ups that initially occur. The estimated time is two weeks, which allows time for a pre and post-assessment of the experience, as well as two units to be read electronically.

Resources

As St. Andrews Priory is a laptop school, the students all have a device (Apple MacBook) capable of reading an electronic text. Printing costs for assessments are minimal due to small class sizes.

Data Collection

The data will primarily be based on student response and results of teacher observation. Student participation and response is important to this study as it seeks to discover if students get more out of an electronic text. Secondly, teacher observation is needed to assess student response during class discussion. This data will be collected through student and teacher survey. It will be primarily subjective data; hence, the reliability will be low. Options such as tests cannot be used because it would require that certain students do not traditional texts. The risk of lower scores resulting from exclusive use of electronic media is not acceptable for this project.

Data Analysis

Student survey will be used to find if students enjoyed or even preferred the option of using classroom texts in electronic forms. While subjective, teacher analysis of classroom and test response questions will be considered to learn if any students showed increased or improved participation.

Discussion

Description

Although initial responses to the survey were favorable, several factors served as roadblocks to reaching a successful conclusion. The first issue centered on the need for a unified text. As the students had already purchased the required reading material, they were (reasonably)

unwilling to pay for an electronic version. Free web versions of the text were investigated, but a sufficient one that had the expanded tools needed to answer the second research question.

Secondly, the variable of a unified electronic reader could not be overcome. Some students had Mac laptops, while others used PCs, while still others were familiar with reading electronic books via an e-reader (Kindle Nook, etc.) while still others wished to use their smart phones, notable the Apple iPhone. No funding existed to provide like devices to students, though this is hardly necessary as stated above, all of the students had a device capable of reading electronic texts. The main detriment was time. With the various electronic reading devices, this study would need time set aside to train students on the specific use of a specific test to ensure that results were unified.

Overall, the initial results show a strong interest in the use of electronic texts in the classroom, either as a supplement or even a replacement to traditional print texts. The most common apprehension was the perceived inability to take notes or otherwise mark important sections for quick reference before tests and class discussions. Upon discovering that these features are available on most electronic readers, student interest grew more.

Theory of Change

In analyzing the results of this research study, it is clear that technology was the limiting factor. Specific texts offer the most features and readability on specific electronic reading devices, hence, deep research before initiating such a project is required to align the variables and ensure reliable data.

The goal of such a project is to increase literacy. Such a research project aims to achieve enhanced reading abilities two ways. First, empowering students to use electronic readers gives

them access to a vast number of reduced priced or free texts available instant download. The logic of this is that young learners will always have a book nearby. Concerning classroom work specifically, it is believed that a student will be more likely to read assigned texts if they are always available on their phone or laptop, verses large textbooks that often stay at home.

Secondly, electronic readers offer an array of tools to enhance reading. Tools such as copy and paste note taking, tap-screen dictionary and even multimedia links have shown promise in previous research. Such research has primarily been at the collegiate level or used in ESL classrooms, but it is the opinion of this researcher that such results apply to all learners.

At its most fundamental level, improving literacy is achieved by reading more. Moreover, what is read is not nearly as important as how much is read along with the student's level of engagement. Therefore, the underlying goal is to first prompt students to enjoy reading and second, to enhance their reading comprehension via enhanced electronic reading.

Action Plan

With available funding, supplying students with an electronic reading device would give the teacher the most control choosing enhanced texts. In addition, using a unified e-reader allows the teacher to most effectively learn and teach the features of the device. Without funding, which is always a strong possibility, the teacher would need to investigate the features of popular electronic reading devices. Next, offering a short seminar to students at the beginning of the semester would be the recommended action. As classroom time is always short, it is recommended that the educator offer extra credit for students to attend the demonstration to learn how useful their electronic reader is. A survey identifying which students have an e-reader

device, as well as its form (smart phone, tablet, commercial e-reader) would allow the educator to assess the need (market) for such a presentation.

Finding (preferably) free versions of required classroom texts would be the educator's next task. Once identified, the educator would list the links or passwords to access the text, making their use in electronic form optional. It is strongly advised that the educator also post instructions on where to find the text and what electronic tools are recommended to enhance their study and absorption; an animated PowerPoint is recommended here.

From here, the teacher need only give occasional guidance to ensure that accessing and exploring electronic texts is satisfactory. It is believed that such an effort can only be judged beneficial or not by the educator through observed means. Clearly, splitting up classrooms in control and test groups and judging academic performance raises serious ethical questions. Therefore, the main, if not singular goal of the researcher is to advocate the use of electronic texts with the belief that "modernizing" texts will result in expanded student literacy.

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Appendix A

Name _____

Date _____

E-books, for the purpose of this survey, are any texts (books, short stories, but **not** articles or websites) found in electronic format (readable on your computer, smart phone, e-reader device, tablet). In other words—non-print.

1. Have you ever read an e-book before?

Yes No

**2. What format(s) have you used?
(circle all that apply)**

Computer

Cell phone

E-reader (Kindle, Nook, etc.)

Other (please specify) _____

**3. Why have you used an e-book?
(circle all that apply)**

For a research assignment

For pleasure or personal interest

Required reading in a course

Other (please specify) _____

4. Would you be willing to read a section of a required classroom text in electronic format and then complete a second survey that describes your experience?

Yes No