Chapter 9
Reading Beyond the Borders:
Observations on Digital eBook Readers and Adolescent Reading Practices

Jason T. Edwards
University of Arkansas, USA

ABSTRACT

Many adolescents resist reading texts for academic purposes because they perceive books as isolated and primitive; furthermore, they feel assigned readings hold little interest for them. An alternative is the digital ebook reader, which offers users the ability to instantly access and read a wide variety of books. As part of the discussion on integrating technology into classrooms to enhance Language Arts instruction, this chapter highlights general findings from a semester-long case study involving high school students using Kindle® ebook readers. The purpose of the study was to determine whether ebooks are a preferable medium for younger users, and whether ebooks influence reading behaviors and practices among adolescents in both academic and non-academic contexts. The study yielded insight into students' purposes for academic and for leisurely reading, as well as the benefits, and drawbacks, to using digital ebook readers. By understanding the relationship between technology and classroom pedagogy, educators can foster students' critical engagement in reading tasks and actively contribute to curricular reading lists.

INTRODUCTION

When I see devices such as the digital ebook reader, once science fiction for me, but an everyday reality for my students, I cannot help but be envious. It amazes me that they can read a wide variety of books on one device that also allows them to instantaneously look up problematic words, access the Internet to verify information, and share annotated comments and highlights with other users; these are functions that would have helped me tremendously during high school. Despite the novelty of ebooks for my generation, these devices influence how the younger generation interacts in a hyper-mediated world consisting of computers, the Internet, and mobile communications (Hagood, 2000; Kress 2003; Prensky, 2001). So it disheartens me that with all these

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3974-4.ch009

new media at their disposal, many students still seem disengaged in, or apathetic towards, reading for school (Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert 1985; McKenna, Ellsworth, & Kear 1995). Why?

Perhaps it is because we still use print books in classes when students are more comfortable reading digital devices. By comparison, students no longer use an abacus for computing equations in math classes; scientific calculators allow students to make much more complex calculations in less time. If screen-based technology has truly become "the central discursive field of our culture" (Slattery and Kowalski, 1998, p. 65), then it would be understandable if students are frustrated with English Language Arts classes that do not fully incorporate—or even limit—technology in classes. In fact, Meerow (2005) describes how students compare classroom methods and instruction to "the Stone Age" (p. 199); Beers, Probst & Rief (2007) further the explanation that if students think the methods for literacy instruction in schools are less efficient than the methods they use outside of school, they will place lessened value on the "academic literacy…schools demand" (p. 10). Although many schools try to update pedagogy by introducing technological tools into school curricula, Evans (2005) contests that many secondary institutions "have not changed with the times even though there are well-researched calls for the need for such changes" (p. 7). Prensky (2001) argues that the need for such changes arises from the fact that digital students'[1] brains are not conditioned to endure the slower-paced methods of reading, writing, and research in the absence of technology. What ensues is a possible disjunction between how we instruct students to read in school and how they read at home.

Educators must remember that digital media are a vital component of students' learning styles: students read screens, not pages; they cross-reference information almost instantaneously using hyperlinks, not by poring over volumes of encyclopedia; they compose on-screen with their fingertips. With regard to reading, Herrington, Hodgson, & Moran (2005) assert that reading is "no longer exclusively the private book world of the print reader, but now more social worlds" through online interaction (p. 1). It is important for educators to accept the fact that students

> *are used to the instantaneity of hypertext, downloaded music, phones in their pockets, a library on their laptops, beamed messages and instant messaging. They've been networked most or all of their lives. They have little patience for lectures, step-by-step logic, and "tell-test" instruction. (Prensky, 2001, p. 3)*

It is equally important that academic environments incorporate what students "read" on a regular basis, how they access the content, and how they use the information to "form and inform identities" (Hagood, 2008, p. 512).

So if printed books are a step towards the Stone Age, then digital ebook readers such as the Amazon Kindle®, the Barnes and Noble Nook®, and functions on the Apple iPad® are steps towards the twenty-first century. Digital ebook readers offer several functions that situate the act of reading in a medium with which students may be more comfortable. Screen-based reading and adjustable font size are functions with which students are already familiar and afford an increased sense of control of the text. Interactive functions allow students to "engage" with the texts by providing more immediate access to supplemental information through web access and internal glossaries. If students make use of the full spectrum of functions digital ebook readers possess, then they may approach reading tasks with renewed enthusiasm.

However, we must first understand how media affect our students' engagement in reading, how they perceive their own reading abilities, and how they construct their knowledge bases. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the relationship between reading practices and technology by addressing the following research questions: can digital ebook readers influence students' literacy