



Using E-Books and E-Readers to Promote Reading in School Libraries: Lessons from the Field

Ray Doiron

University of Prince Edward Island
Charlottetown, PE, Canada

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Abstract:

This paper explores the issues around building e-book collections and of using e-readers in school libraries and the challenges facing teacher-librarians in creating an e-reading component in school library programs. The challenges come as we explore questions around the usefulness of e-reading resources, our tendencies to romanticize the printed book as the chief way of motivating reading, as well as finding strategies to manage and circulate these resources effectively. Whether it is to provide access to e-reading materials for inquiry and information literacy, downloading an e-book for personal reading or establishing online book clubs and e-reading blogs, school libraries are experiencing mounting pressure to find ways to connect their traditional reading promotions goals with the online world where so many students spend so much time. Drawing from recent research on the influence and penetration of e-books and e-readers, examples from several school libraries and e-mail interviews, an informal analysis revealed several key ideas that should support other teacher-librarians who want to address these issues. Teacher-librarians are encouraged to understand the motivational influence of these digital tools and to accept them as positive and useful in promoting reading and an important addition to the toolkits used to motivate positive reading habits.

Introduction

For teacher-librarians, promoting reading and developing lifelong reading habits have always been parallel goals with developing information literacy through their integrated school library programs. This has traditionally included developing extensive collections of quality children's literature (picture books and novels), as well as rich information books, all in support of the school curriculum and as resources to support positive reading habits. Computerization and the pervasive infiltration of the Internet have dramatically altered all areas of work for teacher-librarians. The school library community has fully engaged in

management uses of technologies: automating library collections; providing reference online; providing access to databases and electronic materials; as well as building a significant virtual presence through school library websites, archives of student work, and collected bookmarks of thematic resources. However, the traditional areas of promoting reading and providing readers' advisory have often remained static and bound by face-to-face methods such as conducting book talks; building in-library displays; and bulletin board displays. There is a growing body of research on home and family influences on children's motivations for reading. (Doiron & Shapiro, 2007; Doiron, 2003; Baker, 2003; Baker, Scher & Mackler, 1997), as well as evidence that by improving students' access to reading materials and opportunities to interact with peers about their reading, teachers can do a better job of helping all readers become skillful, motivated readers (Dreher, 2003). Since technology is seen as occupying more and more of students time out of school, it would seem important to explore how these two areas might unite to explore how new technologies such as e-books and e-readers support the goals of motivating students to read.

Many public libraries have embraced the use of e-books and e-readers in their efforts to promote reading, keep up with client demands and address the specific needs of young readers. Academic libraries really led the way by embracing digital access to professional and academic articles and full-text e-books. While school libraries have been slow to respond to the pressure for an e-reading component in their programs, evidence is growing that more and more school libraries are field-testing the use of services where students and teachers can access e-books. Some are even adding e-readers to their collections and allowing students to borrow the e-reader and the books loaded on its hard drive. This has presented teacher-librarians with serious challenges in trying to accept their roles in meeting these new demands for digital books for students, while finding ways to manage, circulate and build these collections given their costs, the new technical skills they demand and a variety of issues around digital rights management (DRM).

Using current professional literature and examples from school libraries, this paper explores the issues around building e-book collections and of using e-readers in school libraries and the challenges facing teacher-librarians in creating an e-reading component in school library programs. The challenges come as we explore questions around the selection of quality e-reading resources, managing them as part of our collections and circulating these resources effectively. Whether it is to provide access to e-reading materials for research and information literacy, downloading an e-book for personal reading or establishing online book clubs and e-reading blogs, school libraries are experiencing mounting pressure to find ways to connect our teaching and reading promotions goals with the online world where so many students spend so much time.

What are e-books and e-readers?

Wikipedia defines e-books (also referred to as electronic books and digital books) as “book-length publications in digital form, consisting of text, images, or both, and produced on, published through, and readable on computers or other electronic devices” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-book>). E-books can be books originally published in a traditional way and then digitized for use as an e-book or they can be books written directly for the digital market. To read an e-book, readers need access to a computer, a cell phone or an e-reader, which is an electronic device, designed primarily for reading e-books, periodicals, and newspapers (Amazon Kindle, Nook, Kobo, iPad for examples).

E-books have been readily available since the early 1980's and libraries have been growing steadily in providing access to e-books, either ones available for viewing from an e-library service, or ones that can be downloaded to a computer or e-reader (*Library Journal*, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c). Books whose copyright has moved into the public domain were some of the first books to be digitized into e-books and many e-book collections reflect this access to "the classics". Two studies conducted by *Library Journal* (*Library Journal*, 2010a & 2010b) give one snapshot of what is happening with e-books in libraries in United States. One-third of the close to 700 school libraries surveyed reported offering e-books to readers with the percentages climbing from elementary to secondary school libraries. Of those who don't currently offer e-books, 25% report they plan to start doing so soon. Most e-books are accessed through a web-based service on a computer with the use of e-readers seen as a growth area. Over 50% of the e-book collections are fiction titles with reference materials and nonfiction forming the balance of the collections (*Library Journal*, 2010b).

Online e-library services are also growing giving teacher-librarians and students access to hundreds of thousands of books. Sites like the [World E-Book Library](#) and the [School E-Book Library](#) make titles available for mobile devices like iPhones and e-readers with annual fees and easy access. Online collections such as the [eBook Library](#), [Tumble Books](#), [International Children's Digital Library](#) (ICDL), and the [Digital Gallery of World Picture Books](#) offer many titles that students and teacher-librarians can use for school assignments, inquiry projects and reading enjoyment. The ICDL is also available through a new iPhone App that makes the collection available on an iPhone anywhere, anytime.

With the rapid changes in the global information world, more and more publishers are now releasing their new titles in traditional and digitized formats, both in response to demands from library users, researchers and public agencies, and in response to the growing phenomenon of e-readers. In fact, an Interactive Data Corporation (IDC) study (2011) indicated that e-reader sales grew 325% in 2010 over sales in 2009, with over 12 million units sold in the last three months of 2010. This is a clear indication that e-readers are here to stay and that the penetration of this technology throughout large sections of the world's population is growing quickly. Other data suggest that over 50% of the world's population have access to cell phones (Shuler, 2009), which also can also hold e-books and allow readers to download books from online bookstores. What is apparent is that mobile devices for e-reading are growing in availability and use among youth and their families and that the number of e-books to fill these e-readers is increasing in quantity and accessibility.

What does research say about e-books?

Although the overall percentage of e-book sales is still less than 2% of the market share (*Library Journal* 2010b), a body of new research is emerging around the value and use of e-books with young readers. Researchers have explored how e-books have benefits for children's reading engagement (Moody, Justice, & Cabell, 2010) and how they may actually help readers better understand the texts they are reading (Larson, 2009). The rich multimedia features in many newer e-books (such as audio narration, sound effects, animations, links to dictionaries, etc.) support the reading of the text and help readers visualize meaning and comprehend more easily (Grimshaw, 2007). While some children may actually find the multimedia features distracting and interfering with their comprehension (DeJong & Bus, 2004), most of the early research is consistent in the fact that e-books can be useful in motivating reading and encouraging readers to read more (Ip, Chu, & Sit, 2010; Maynard,

2010; Short, 2010; Strout, 2010; Grimshaw, 2008; Korat & Shamir, 2006; Fasimpaur, 2004; Grant, 2004).

One particular type of e-book that has been examined by researchers as well is the e-textbook. These books are rising in popularity since they are more economical to produce and they can be updated more easily. E-textbooks are more frequently used with older readers but they too have been shown to be readily accepted by users and effective in motivating participation in group and individual classroom activities (Maynard, & Cheyne, 2005).

Benefits of, and problems with e-books

Most teacher-librarians are familiar with the list of benefits often publicized for e-books (Pastore, 2008; EDUCAUSE, 2006). Advocates claim e-books are cheaper to produce and to buy with many free titles available; they save trees and take up less space than traditional books; they can be updated more easily and revisions and errors corrected; they have many multimedia features that enhance the reading experience (hyperlinks, audio/video extensions, still/animated images etc.); they can provide new opportunities for persons who face learning challenges in their reading; they promote and support self-publishing and the publishing and distributing of books by new authors; they make more obscure books easier to obtain; they allow for the reader to add comments and provide feedback to authors and publishers; and they are portable, light and easy to use.

At the same time as the list of benefits is touted, others voice concerns about the availability and equitable access to e-books, as well as raising questions about how effective they really are. According to Siracusa (2009) complaints include: 1) the size and quality of the screen; 2) resistance to reading on a screen rather than holding a “real book”; 3) the e-reading device itself – too small, scared of breaking it, having to charge the batteries, etc.; and 4) the lack of e-book standards both in platform and publishing rules. Others point out issues of e-book piracy (Rivero, 2010; Spring, 2010) and conflicts with open access, propriety rights and copyright (Williams, 2011) collectively referred to as digital rights management (DRM).

While the results from early studies into the value and benefits of e-books seem to yield inconsistent results, it is obvious more research is needed (Chau, 2008) before e-books are dismissed simply as a passing novelty. From the perspective of teacher-librarians, it is the consistent evidence that these e-books motivate readers to read more that has the greatest implication.

What does research say about e-readers?

When it comes to the use of e-readers, they too are being explored in more depth by a growing group of researchers. Informal research focused on the penetration of e-readers into the market place (*Bookseller*, 2011; Weinstein, 2010) and the growing demand for e-readers (Corso, 2010), while others tried to determine which e-readers are best (TopTenReviews, 2011). These reports have declared 2010 as “the year of the e-reader” (Anscombe, 2010), with a major turning point in sales and an acceleration in the demand for e-readers (Milliot, 2010) creating a sense that a “tipping point” has been reached in their impact on publishing and reading.

Studies have also examined the efficacy of using e-readers to replace textbooks (Thayer & Lee, 2010) and found students preferred using a standard computer since they could get better access to note-taking and checking references. While future updates to the e-reader may harmonize with some of the tools found on computers, the researchers concluded e-readers are really designed for leisure reading and as yet, are not fully developed to truly support academic reading (Thayer & Lee, 2010; Clark, Goodwin, Samuelson, & Coker, 2008).

Since digital technologies are so appealing to today's youth, research seems to support the value of e-readers as a factor in motivating young readers to read more (Maynard, 2010; Strout, 2010) with some evidence they may be particularly valuable in motivating reluctant readers (Ash, 2010; Carter, 2010; Fasimpaur, 2004). E-readers also have been used in research exploring children's reading comprehension (Larson, 2010). Evidence from this work suggests e-readers offer more than just portability and storage capacity; they support readers through their use of multiple tools and text features such as text-to-speech options, dictionaries and note-taking capabilities (Larson, 2010).

There can be little doubt that e-books and e-readers are here to stay. In fact, data from publishers/distributors of e-books and the makers/marketers of e-readers have all indicated that growing sales and growing demands will lead to further innovations in these technologies and wider acceptance of their use. This information, coupled with evidence that those who own an e-reader buy more books now than before they owned an e-reader (Duncan, 2010), should awaken teacher-librarians to a reality that looms before them, one that holds great promise in our goals of supporting literacy and promoting reading habits.

How are teacher-librarians and schools responding?

Teacher-librarians are facing some difficult choices (Hellman, 2010) as they struggle to maintain their traditional collections while facing the growing pressure to include e-books and e-readers in the resources and services they offer. With some schools already abandoning traditional library collections and issuing students e-readers fully loaded with e-books (Visit [Cushing Academy](#), and [Clearwater High School](#) in Florida for examples), the future will indeed be challenging. While many school libraries seem to be caught in a wait and see attitude, teacher-librarians are facing uncertainty about the best time and most effective ways to introduce e-book services. The following short examples are meant to demonstrate the "first steps" that many school libraries have taken and when examined together they demonstrate that although there may not be one best way to get into e-books and e-readers, each of these library professionals would agree that we just have to jump in and give it a try (Foote, 2011; Ishizuka, 2010).

Kathy Parker, a library media specialist in an Illinois school district started a project where she first placed 18 Kindle e-readers into the hands of seventh and eighth grade students, expanded that project with 117 Kindles in the middle schools and then started a project with second grade students and their teacher. Students were very positive about using the e-readers and they were quick to learn to manage the e-reader. Teachers found they had improved in their comprehension and their ability to take responsibility for their own learning (Barack, 2010).

Buffy Hamilton and Roxanne Johnson, library media specialists at the “Unquiet Library” at [Creekview High School](#) set the goal of trying to make their library a place to make some positive "noise" and to build a library program that makes a difference in the lives of students and teachers. As part of their goals of making the school library responsive to student needs and interest, they have an extensive e-reader, e-book program that includes documents for signing out e-readers, procedures for downloading e-books and policies and procedures for using the e-collection (See <http://www.theunquietlibrary.libguides.com/kindles> for examples of their work.). Their site includes several videos and articles documenting the procedures and challenges faced as they developed their e-book collection and services.

Joanne Kallhoff, a District Media Specialist in Madison, South Dakota, reports that although there are only two e-readers available for students to sign out, this is a growing area of attention in school libraries and one she and other media specialists are addressing more and more. In her state, they have access to a database that the state purchases for them and one smaller one ([Gale e-books](#)) that they purchase locally. Plans are also developing to purchase access to [Overdrive](#), which allows students to download e-books to their own devices. Currently, Kallhoff estimates 20% of her faculty own e-readers while approximately 10% of students do. Many of her students have personal laptops and therefore have access to many sites for accessing e-books on their own. Kallhoff says selection of e-books hinges on finding ones that are easily accessible and that function with the devices you currently have. Establishing and building e-book collections do present unique problems, but Kallhoff reports that it takes time to advertise the e-book collection and to train users in accessing the materials. As advice to other teacher-librarians, Kallhoff believes most companies are moving in this direction and she suggests trying a few titles and maybe starting with a trial subscription to [Overdrive](#).

Pamela Harland, a teacher-librarian at [Plymouth Regional High School in New Hampshire](#), received a grant to purchase twenty e-readers and one of the first projects she developed was an e-book club. The group was led by her students who also set the agendas and decided on meeting times. She also invited the book club members to get involved in collection development by suggesting new e-books for the e-readers. After several meetings discussion did drift toward the use of the devices themselves and students reported: 1) they were reading much more since they got the e-reader; 2) they were impressed with how quickly they could add a new book to their e-reader without leaving home; 3) and they liked the feel of it and the fact that they can use it in college for textbooks as well. They found there was a bit of adjustment time at first and they were not impressed with the text-to-speech feature. Harland was very positive about the response of her students reporting, “our already flourishing book club has become more dynamic and engaged” (Harland, P., Plante, A., Marker, J., Falter, C., Thompson, K., Guilmett, K., & Hogan, M, 2010)

Several private schools are making international news as they move into the use of e-books and e-readers in very big ways.

(1) [Cushing Academy](#) in Boston, Massachusetts led by the principal Jim Tracy, removed the majority of the traditional library books from the bookshelves and replaced them with computers giving students access to over 20,000 (and growing) electronic reference resources and reading materials. Although accused of attacking books, Tracy sees this as the future of libraries with a greater emphasis on providing access to electronic research resources and online collaborative learning. He also

believes “a librarian will be more important than ever by working collaboratively with other educators to teach students how to navigate and use digital information” (Staino, ¶ 11). While eliminating most print books seems drastic, and even draconian, this vision for a more interactive learning centre can not be doubted.

(2) At [Cedars School of Excellence, Greenock, Scotland](#), which serves children ages 5-12, every student was issued an iPad and most of their school work is completed using this and other digital technologies. The school follows the principles of Scotland’s [Curriculum for Excellence](#) philosophy which emphasizes meaningful play, active learning, inquiry and investigation, collaborative learning, integrated uses for digital technologies and building in all learners knowledge and respect for their own communities as well as their role as global citizens. It is obvious that such a philosophy is very much in sync with common beliefs and values of today’s school library programs.

Many middle and high school libraries are still only into pilot projects where they are “testing the waters” and moving slowly into the e-book and e-reader phenomenon. A few “brave” schools are making high profile moves to change the role and contents of their school libraries and thus the course of student learning. One can sense that a major shift is happening in the very nature of the types of resources school libraries offer and in the ways these resources are accessed and used by teachers and learners. These changes are seen by some as a needed “revolution” that is set to sweep over school systems worldwide (Ferriter, 2010).

What lessons can we take from our teacher-librarian colleagues?

Everyone’s experiences are different as they wrestle with staying abreast of innovations in e-books and e-readers. Budgets are always our major limitation, but so are attitudes and beliefs about printed books and what we see as our role in the school library. There can be little doubt that e-books will continue to grow in influence and availability and we cannot afford to become nay-sayers and insist on holding on to romantic notions of the traditional print book. If we look at most innovations (think videocassette tapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, Blu-Ray, iPads, smartphones etc.), we seem to have a great capacity to assimilate new technologies so they exist alongside traditional ones. As newer, more innovative devices come along, others like CD-ROMs fall by the wayside. Others maintain their place and co-exist with the new technologies. This is most likely what we will see in the near future: traditional books will still be used in school libraries for sure, but also for sure, will be the need to include e-books and to accommodate the users of technologies like e-readers, smart phones and any emerging mobile technologies that may come along. Rather than lamenting the loss of books and feeling threatened by these tools, we should be embracing new technologies and harnessing their power to motivate our youth to be readers in the new age - the age of the mobile learner of the 21st century (Allen, 2011).

Luckily we have many teacher-librarian colleagues who have expanded their e-book collections, developed circulation and management procedures, and who have integrated e-readers into their services and their school library programs. Their experiences are most often shared through the [Blogosphere](#) – the interconnected community and social network of blogs on the Internet. Specific school library websites (see links above), sites where issues facing school libraries are discussed (Examples: [The Unquiet Library](#) and [School Library Learning 2.0](#)) and trusted school library periodicals ([School Library Journal](#), [School Libraries](#)

[Worldwide](#) and [Teacher Librarian](#)) can all be valuable sources of information and advice for those searching for answers on how to start using e-books and e-readers.

In preparing this paper, dozens of articles were reviewed, blogs were visited and e-mail interviews with teacher-librarians were conducted. The following points represent an informal analysis of the information gathered and several key ideas that may assist teacher-librarians in starting or enhancing their work with e-books and e-readers.

- *Just Jump in!* Foote's (2011) best advice is to simply jump in and get started, Try experimenting with a few e-books at first and then expand from there. Same thing with e-readers – just two or three can be the start of building this service and motivational practice into your program.
- *Talk with Colleagues.* There are no formulas for success that we can easily copy. We all have different contexts (and different budgets) with which we work and it is best to listen to our colleagues and learn from them. The ideas are out there and we need to connect to them and build solutions that will work for us.
- *No Money for e-readers?* If that is the case, you can still build access to e-books through your existing school library computers. They can become accessible at your school library website and be seen as additions to the hard copy collection in your physical library space. While you can view e-books without an e-reader, students find them very appealing and as Uhlmann (2010) advises, we need to add them to our “digital toolkits”.
- *Target your Collection Development.* It is a good idea to focus on one area of your e-book collection first, for example a popular fiction genre that your students enjoy or one subject area in your curriculum that is commonly used. Build that area first rather than trying to implement too many subjects or genre at once. You could work on acquiring reference materials which could be accessed through the library desktop computers and work to find the funds for a few e-readers and have them used for fiction e-books.
- *The Device Landscape.* It is very confusing to know which e-reader to start with (Kindle, iPad, Kobo, Nook etc.) as there is no clear “winner” yet in the marketplace. The best advice is to discuss this with other teacher-librarians and with your district school library coordinators and come to a decision on which device will work best with the e-book distributors most commonly accessed in your school district. Students could also advise you on which e-readers seem to be the easiest to use and most common in your school. Devices that allow note-taking have a definite advantage for school applications.
- *Vendors and Distributors.* This too is an issue to be discussed at the school district level, so the best deals can be worked out with e-book distributors. Uhlmann (2010) stresses that most vendors are not really interested in targeting libraries in their sales, but prefer to market and sell directly to consumers. So it is key to find providers that fit into your current system and the databases that are supported by your district. For example, if you use [EBSCO](#), then using [NetLibrary](#) would make sense since [EBSCO](#) recently purchased the assets of [NetLibrary](#). Services like those offered by [Google Books](#) can also be an easy way to gain access to e-books many of which are available free.
- *Start Small and Promote.* It is always wise advice to start into something new with small steps and build from there. Foote (2010) agrees by saying “ start small, know your goals and inform yourself as much as possible” (p. 59). We must become

knowledgeable and experienced using e-books and e-readers if we are to support students in their reading habits. Get yourself an e-reader and experience reading in this new format. Do some research on what e-books are available for free or a small fee and start adding them to the main computers in the library. Add a book or two to your e-reader. Show students you are in the know and keen to meet their needs. Once you have added some e-books to your collection, promote them, hold a session to show how to use them, conduct surveys on who has an e-reader, poll students and staff on which e-books to purchase.

Conclusion

Reading is changing and reading material is evolving into new formats and new means of accessing reading materials. For teacher-librarians, this is a very good thing. It is opening up an amazing opportunity to bring reading to even more people in the world and to take some lead in the reading revolution underway. Our jobs have always hinged on finding the right book for every reader and getting that book into her/his hands. I am inspired by this challenge one that is echoed in the words of Peters (2010):

We must continue to study their [our students'] reading habits, then design and redesign our content collections, systems, and services to help them improve and maximize their reading experiences. We are in a long-term commitment with readers. We need to be vocal, flexible, and patient as the longstanding relationship between readers and the libraries that serve them continues to evolve (Peters, 2010; ¶39).

As well as the words of colleagues and writers and researchers around the world, I pay attention to the ideas and feelings of my students who give me confidence to continue in my role as a promoter and champion of reading. Mark is a 13-year-old middle school student with a passion for tennis and for reading fantasy fiction. When asked about his use of an e-reader and what advantages it gave him, he commented: "I use it all the time, even in school, whenever I have some spare time. If I were to choose between a Kindle and a book, I would choose the Kindle." He likes that it is portable, light, easy to handle and easy on the eyes when reading for a long time. It seems to me it is students like Mark to whom we must listen and whose lead we should follow as we develop new ways to motivate reading with our students. Teacher-librarians have always tried to provide an instructional leadership role in developing inquiry and research skills with students while encouraging students to develop positive lifelong reading habits. This will not change. The research reviewed, the experiences of other teacher-librarians shared and the voices of youth such as Mark should motivate us to see e-books and e-readers as innovative vehicles, digital tools for reaching both of our school library goals.

I will leave the last word to Mark: "I've read 54 Kindle books since Christmas, and I think that this device will revolutionize the reading world."

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Name of presenter:

Ray Doiron, PhD

Position or title of presenter:

Professor – Literacy and School Librarianship

Presenter's affiliated institution:

Faculty of Education

University of Prince Edward Island

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island

Canada C1A 4P3

E-mail address:

raydoiron@upei.ca

Telephone/fax numbers:

Office: 001-902-566-0694

Fax: 001-902-566-0416

Short biographical statement:

Ray Doiron is Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), Canada. He teaches courses in early literacy and school librarianship and his research interests include digital literacies, early childhood education, social networking and school libraries. He has traveled extensively visiting libraries in several countries and currently has research projects on the role of play in early childhood education.

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