FEATURE

E-BOOKS IN PUBLIC SCHOOL LIBRARIES

Are We Th

ere Yet?

Allison Rothman
msallisonreads@gmail.com

All Aboard?

Demands for school technology innovations, implementation of 1:1 device models, and increased interest in digital media highlight complicated issues such as funding, equity, and decision making for e-book collection development and programming in school libraries. School librarians considering purchase of e-books for school libraries still cannot follow a clear or consistent track through this uncertain e-book terrain. With multiple purchasing, delivery, and device options, school libraries can choose to partner with public libraries, purchase e-books from varied providers, or intentionally select the option of waiting until e-book use becomes more straightforward.

At the Station

As I contemplated e-book options for my school library I investigated current trends and literature but determined that existing solutions did not comfortably fit our learning community. Our school and district had no distinct plan for e-book adoption, and many students had no personal electronic devices. To ensure e-book platforms would remain relevant and practical in our environment, I chose to explore how e-books and e-readers work in our community.

This article addresses my experience with an e-book action research study designed to illuminate my school library e-book decisions within a manageable and affordable pilot program. Over the course of one school year, this study explored public middle school book club students' use of public library and open source e-books for pleasure reading on Kindle e-readers.

Although this study was initiated to inform decisions for a school library environment without 1:1 technology, our school has since moved to a 1:1 tablet model made possible by a generous grant. However, the results of the study are still useful to me for the insights I got into students' preferences for resource delivery and to other librarians in schools not able to afford to implement 1:1 device models. In addition, use of e-books in school libraries is still relatively new, and the evolutionary nature of their application brings tremendous challenges requiring flexibility on the part of all stakeholders. Based on my study findings I offer suggestions here for e-book implementation in non-1:1 environments while at the same time reflecting on our newly realized iPads-for-all world.

Riding the Local

In planning for action research that investigates middle school e-book use I considered the consumer e-reader landscape and worked with school administration to determine practical methods of gathering data. I opted to use Kindle e-readers for several reasons. With the Kindle students can download public library content wirelessly and without cost. To prevent students' being distracted by the variety of features supported on tablets and by the backlit brightness of the screen, and to allow students to read in bright sunlight I selected a dedicated e-reader with an e-ink screen. Working within the existing weekly structure of our book club provided an established cohort of dedicated student participants willing to explore technology for pleasure reading. Students were assigned Kindles for personal home and school use throughout the school year.

Making the Grade

After I had drafted, distributed, and collected permission and assent forms, students were assigned e-readers and protective cases. Genuine enthusiasm was evident as students registered, explored, and personalized their e-readers. Students met weekly for lunch in the school library/learning commons where they had access to computers to set up and filter their San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) OverDrive and Amazon accounts. (OverDrive was the only SFPL aggregator that supported the Kindle format.) Students controlled their own checkout and reading choices, and together they worked through the protocols and strategies for e-borrowing.

I communicated directions for set up of devices and accounts through familiar learning platforms like School Loop, the learning commons homepage, and Google Classroom. Monthly surveys to track progress and concerns of participants were posted to the same forums and were often completed during club meetings. I interviewed all participants at the beginning of the experience to ask about digital reading experiences, public library use, and book preferences.

Speed Limits

Attendance at a voluntary lunchtime book club for middle school students varies considerably throughout the school year. Thirty-three students submitted the September intake survey and by February only thirteen students responded. With a consistent core of participants, generally twelve to eighteen students attended book club weekly. To entice greater participation I began cooking and providing lunch for the club on the last meeting of each month. Fortunately, my kitchen skills helped boost attendance for these meetings and created opportunities for students to complete surveys. As attendance fluctuated, individual participant interviews became challenging; I had intended to interview every student every

month, but, instead, interviewed each student three times during the school year. Eventually, I moved toward a roundtable setting where I asked my interview questions to the group. In each of these interviews (after the one at the beginning of the year) and roundtable discussions I asked the same six questions about comfort level and enjoyment with the e-reader and the process of e-lending as well as about use of print versus digital materials.

Passengers

This cohort generally enjoyed reading and entered this study having some degree of familiarity with public library borrowing and electronics use. Book club members who participated in this study reported reading at least one book for independent pleasure reading each month; 52 percent of these students reported reading five or more books monthly. All but one student used the local public library to get reading materials at least "sometimes." Every participant reported having daily access to at least one type of electronic device such as a smartphone, computer, or tablet. Sixty-five percent of participants had some e-reading experience prior to the study; these experiences included reading e-books on family tablets, using a smartphone app to access Wattpad, trying a friend's device, and accessing e-books on a computer. The remaining 35 percent of the students had no previous e-reading experience. Only one student in the group reported having access to her own personal non-tablet dedicated e-reader.

Although these book club students had experiences, skills, and access to aid their journey into e-reading, several areas needed early attention. All but two students had public library cards, but 58 percent did not have a personal identification number (PIN) or didn't know their PIN to access their SFPL online account. Only one participant had previously checked out an e-book from the public library. Fortunately, no students ranked themselves as "nervous" or "uncomfortable" with the prospect of using Kindles for this project, and more than 66 percent considered themselves "super excited."

Chugging Along

Student participants enthusiastically explored their new e-readers, the San Francisco Public Library's OverDrive portal, and Kindle content controls through their Amazon accounts. At weekly meetings students collaborated to share knowledge and experiences navigating these components of the project. After the first month with Kindles, 66 percent of the participants reported receiving assistance while navigating the various websites and mechanics of downloading e-books. Students sought help from other book club students, the school librarian, friends, and the public library online chat system.

Although nearly all participants reported high levels of comfort with the process of using e-readers,

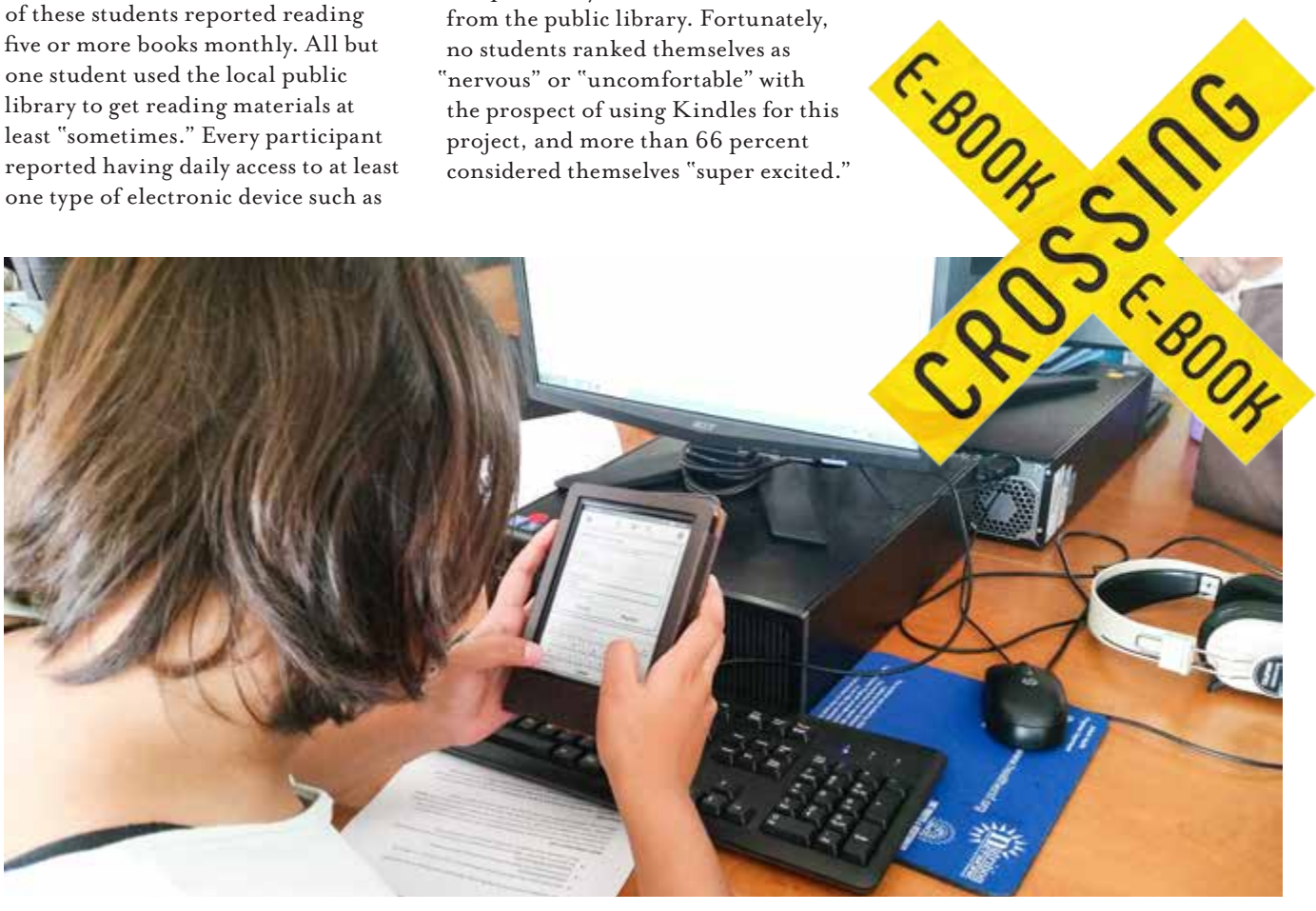


Figure 1. E-reader set up.

Until a school librarian has determined how—and whether—students will use e-books, and how students will access them, I recommend practicing restraint.

students also noted complaints about the process of e-book borrowing:

> *I got frustrated when I had to put an e-book on hold and had to wait forever!* R.J.
>
> *I think that there should be an easier way to download e-books.* L.L.
>
> *It takes a looooong time for e-books to get returned to the library.* R.Y.

Often the popular books students wanted to read were unavailable, and I began training students to create wish lists and place holds for e-books. I also demonstrated how students could speed the hold process for other borrowers by returning e-books through their Amazon accounts prior to the automatic return date.

Junction

The book club students considered their new reading medium from numerous perspectives, including convenience, aesthetics, and familiarity. After the first month with the Kindles more than 90 percent of respondents reported reading e-books *and* print books. This pattern continued throughout the study with at least 65 percent of participants reading print books in addition to e-books each month. During roundtable discussions student opinions were mixed when comparing e-books to print books. Amongst the numerous "thumbs up" and "love it" reactions to e-reading, there were a fair number of "eh" and "just ok" comments, too. While 100 percent of the group plans to continue reading e-books for pleasure at least "sometimes," 50 percent prefer the print experience or didn't have a preference. Participants appreciated these benefits of e-readers:

> *Ease of check-out and download.* A.L.
>
> *Lightweight.* E.J.
>
> *No need to go to library or bookstore.* A.T.
>
> *They don't waste paper.* L.L.
>
> *Portable.* C.A.P.
>
> *Fast access.* I.L.
>
> *Ability to get books for free.* K.C.
>
> *E-ink more pleasant than backlit tablet screens.* A.T.

And the fans of print materials appreciated:

> *Flipping paper pages.* K.C.
>
> *The solid form.* V.T.
>
> *Seeing their progress through the book.* Z.P.
>
> *The tactile nature of print.* L.S.
>
> *The ability to collect the physical item.* E.Z.

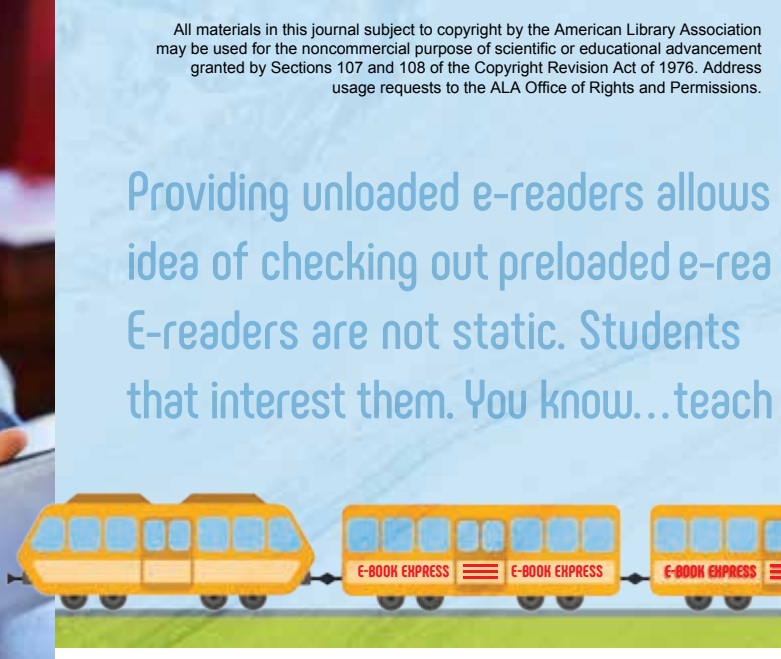
During this study, book club students overwhelmingly preferred obtaining e-content through the SFPL OverDrive portal versus Project Gutenberg's open source collection. Students found the wireless download system more manageable than downloading books to PCs and transferring e-books to the Kindle via USB cables. The only student who preferred Project Gutenberg is a self-described book collector who enjoyed building a collection on her Kindle, even though she had to return the Kindle at the end of the school year.

Putting on the Brakes

This study investigated e-reading for pleasure, which differs significantly from whole-class fiction assignments and other curricular e-content. Book club students chose popular genres and the newest fiction available when reading for pleasure. They experienced frustration when forced to wait for titles they wanted because of a limited number of available copies. Book club participants preferred to read the print version of a title rather than to wait for the e-book. Creating an e-book collection with the depth and size needed to provide value to a school library program is expensive. E-material for pleasure reading can be more expensive than print books. One large popular e-book aggregator provided an estimate of $30,000 for a collection of approximately two thousand e-books, averaging fifteen dollars per e-book.

E-book availability and pricing systems reflect the demands of different publishers. Popular e-book titles might be priced similarly to the corresponding hardback, or they could run upwards of forty dollars a copy. These e-books might be available for purchase, meaning they will remain in the library collection year after year, or titles might need to be repurchased after twenty-four checkouts. With kids new to e-checkout procedures clicking away in the catalog, a potentially large number of unintentional checkouts could increase the required investment. Some titles may need to be repurchased annually. Fiction titles are almost never licensed for multiple simultaneous users, and the license is not perpetual.

Until a school librarian has determined how—and whether—students will use e-books, and how students will access them, I recommend practicing restraint. Investments with specific e-book vendors must be carefully considered; the librarian should also measure the level of commitment to the associated products and apps the library can afford to make. Money spent on e-books linked to a vendor and platform that the library abandons in two years is money poorly spent.



Light at the End of the Tunnel

For schools where few students have access to personal electronics and must use shared e-readers, tablets, or computers, the e-book route is not streamlined. Device and account set-up is challenging for products that presume a 1:1 consumer model. Without individually assigned devices, students must sign in and out of apps and interfaces with every use. Yet even without a take-home device for every student, school libraries can provide e-reading opportunities for their communities. Working with existing systems, technology, and resources school librarians can develop face-to-face and online informational forums for students, teachers, and families to access e-books for pleasure reading.

Purchase e-readers and train students and teachers to access public library collections and public-domain e-books. A small investment in e-readers could launch a school library e-book program that offers the added benefit of bolstering the relationship between the public library and the school library.

Middle school library users often keep books for months; so **check out e-readers for extended periods of time.** Students need time to grow comfortable with the device and the process—and these kids are busy! The most frequent complaint in this study: "I don't have enough time to read." Providing unloaded e-readers allows students to gain essential skills. I don't support the idea of checking out preloaded e-readers just to offer an alternative medium for reading. E-readers are not static. Students should learn to find and access sources for e-books that interest them. You know…teach them how to fish.

In this study several students returned their Kindles and, instead, opted to read through the Kindle app on their smartphones. Numerous students also reported reading fan fiction on their handhelds. In environments with limited access to dedicated e-reading devices and tablets **teach students how to download e-reading and fanfiction apps on their smartphones**. Introduce public library and open source e-collections through tutorials and online instructions. Students are attached to their handhelds. Give them the power to get their favorite books in their pockets right next to their Instagram/Snapchat/next coolest thing.

Bells and Whistles

Schools eligible for Title I, Part A programs can initiate access to a large collection of popular Baker & Taylor/Axis 360 content through a collaboration with New York Public Library, Digital Public Library of America, First Book, and Clever. Only for use with Apple and Android apps, this Open eBooks program does not provide circulation statistics and may require labor-intensive distribution of overly cumbersome log-in codes. For students with a device and motivation this solution opens a door to a wealth of resources. For more information, go to <http://openebooks.net>.

Vendors that provide online public access catalogs (OPACs) to schools hope librarians will develop e-book collections through them because of streamlined cataloging and established purchasing chains. E-books obtained through OPAC vendors are accessible through vendor apps or in-browser reading. Circulation statistics for OPAC-acquired e-content might prove an unfriendly reminder of unfruitful purchases if students do not use these less familiar and less popular apps. In shared device environments students must sign in and out of accounts, resulting in additional effort to access e-content.

E-Equity Line

Any potential e-book solution must consider student equity. Will all students have access to library e-book programs? Since students' access to e-books depends on Internet connections, librarians and schools need creative strategies to help students locate practical local Internet access points. Students currently without home Internet access will probably continue to need external Internet access in the future. Knowing where and how to gain access is a necessary skill for many of our students to develop.

School librarians depend on data to inform, guide, and defend collection-development and programming decisions. Unfortunately, many practical e-reading options for school libraries without 1:1 environments do not provide methods to collect circulation statistics. School librarians should document employed e-book strategies and solutions that help students and teachers locate and access e-materials beyond school collections and survey their communities about external reading sources. If school library circulation statistics drop in parallel with increased library e-book programs the change might indicate that students are reading differently because school librarians are laying down the track across the evolving e-book terrain.

Little-Read Caboose

Unfortunately 1:1 environments do not eliminate all e-book borrowing challenges for school libraries. E-books for school library collections remain costly; students may not have public library cards; public library e-collections may not serve student needs sufficiently; Internet access may be unavailable to students outside of school; and school or district device management may impede e-book app access.

In our present 1:1 environment, students' iPads and available apps are managed by our district department of technology in partnership with the organization providing the grant. Nearly all students and staff have tablets with monthly data plans for two school years. Students may install apps that are assigned to the tablets by the district and the grant provider. However, so far, no efficient and transparent method for teachers and schools to request apps for student use exists.

As I write this during winter break during the first year of our 1:1 grant our students now have access to three different e-book apps. Highlighting the third rail of student e-equity, two of these apps (OverDrive and Axis 360) require students to have active public library cards and PINs, and the third app (Open eBooks) requires inventive communication of cumbersome log-in codes. One quarter of the way into this initiative I can begin to inform students and teachers about e-book availability on their tablets.

School librarians often initiate and innovate with technology in school settings. Considering the expense and potential commitment to e-book programming, districts and schools without thoughtful plans for e-book programming may spend time and funds unwisely. Librarians, administrators, curriculum teams, and district technology leaders must collaborate to engineer smart, relevant policies for school library routes through e-book landscapes.

Allison Rothman
is a teacher librarian at Hoover Middle School in San Francisco, California.