

How can using ebooks support and enhance boys' enthusiasm and success in reading?

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Abstract

This action research project was undertaken in 2010 with boys in upper primary school at Christ Church Grammar School in Perth, Western Australia. The project focused on the question: *How can using e-books support and enhance boys' enthusiasm and success in reading?* Within the library programme and weekly class sessions, boys who were reluctant readers in Year 5 and Year 6 read fiction ebooks to ascertain whether or not this format of story was more enjoyable and sustaining than the traditional hard copy format. The research had very positive outcomes indicating that boys are more interested in reading fiction when it involves the use of technology. These findings are significant, suggesting that emerging tools such as e-readers can have a place in changing the behaviour of reluctant readers to becoming engaged readers of fiction.

Introduction

A significant number of boys at the school were reluctant to take up reading for leisure and it was hoped to ascertain whether or not the use of e-readers as a tool for reading would lead to increased enjoyment and time spent reading, particularly fiction. My own observations over a number of years indicated that boys were more interested in reading when it involved the use of technology and this action research project was designed to develop this hypothesis.

With increasing attention paid to gender research, neuro-scientific findings indicate that boys are more active and tactile than girls and need excitement in their reading (James 2007). As well, technology-based reading may also increase boys' learning with the provision of greater interactivity (Scieska 2000; Moir & Jessel 1992). Such findings direct us away from technology as add-on activities and move us towards embedding technologies into the curriculum (Durrant & Green 1998). Thus e-readers were integrated into the library lesson during reading time and

combined with the normal lesson format that included a variety of activities aimed at motivating reading and enhancing understanding of what had been read (Systra 2004).

This research aimed to show that boys who were reluctant to read fiction stories would have more enthusiasm for reading with the use of e-reader technology. E-readers included Kindles and iPod touch: formats in which previously the boys had little exposure. It also aimed to show that boys would be motivated to sustain their reading, especially in fiction, for longer periods of time if they could read in a technology active environment.

Literature Review

In order to provide effective reading instruction for boys, several factors identified as characteristic of boys must be considered. In general, boys tend to learn better through visual connections, particularly if the information involves pictures and graphs, and if their learning strategies consider their preference for kinaesthetic learning (James 2007; Booth 2002). In a world where “text-messaging, blogging, engaging in online multi-player games, and expertly integrating words, images, and music to create original texts” are viewed as the norm for today’s young learner, Kadger (2006) asks “Can we import these textual spaces and literacies... to help re-connect students who don't see themselves as readers and writers?” If boys are singled out as more likely to lack motivation to read for various reasons, of which the perception that it is a feminine activity is manifest (Cummings 1994; McKenna 1997; Nodelman 2001), then finding different ways to enthuse them about reading as a lifelong and manly activity is challenging. However, there is significant evidence to suggest that technology will benefit boys in their education (Johnson & Harroff 2006; Liu & Huang 2008) and that those technology-based reading experiences will provide greater interactivity, which may enthuse boys to read more for leisure and perhaps to read more fiction (Scieska 2000; Moir & Jessel 1992).

There is no doubt that boys read. Anyone in a school library stands witness to boys engaged in magazines, military books, comics and the newer format of graphic novels, and the world of digital reading and writing: games, YouTube, FaceBook – anything that lets boys connect to their interests; their worlds. However, it is the disengagement in fiction that concerns respected Australian writer James Moloney (2000) who notes that reading fiction is a valid way of deepening a boy’s understanding of the world and that fiction exposes boys to a range of vocabulary, extending their experience of reality. Further, the current English curriculum in

Australian schools focuses on the reading and writing of fiction stories and it is necessary to provide library programmes that connect to boys and that support their reading development, be it fiction or other. If boys appear to be less enthused by reading fiction than other types of literature, then an appropriate question to ask might be ‘How are they experiencing stories?’ Alloway and her colleagues (2002) and Gibson-Langford (2006; 2010) add support to the boys and reading discussion by recommending that, amongst other factors, classrooms need to be democratic spaces, where the real and the everyday, including popular culture, electronic technologies and multi-mediated texts, have a focus and that the environment is active. According to Passey & Rogers (2004), and in support of Alloway, electronic technologies and multi-mediated texts have a positive impact on boys, moving them from ‘burst-like’ patterns of activity to more consistent, persistent levels of activity.

Consequently, it would seem that introducing e-readers to boys as a choice of tool for reading fiction would comply with the research that focuses attention on boys’ kinaesthetic engagement: multimedia, hyperlinks and other interactive components, search features and customizability to change text size or convert text to meet the needs of special readers (Abbott & Kelly, 2004; Buzzetto-More, Sweat-Guy & Elobaid, 2007). Thus, in seeking to make fiction more accessible to boys, an action research project will be undertaken to explore the question *‘How can using ebooks support and enhance boys’ enthusiasm and success in reading?’*

Research Context

Christ Church Grammar School is an Anglican school located on the Swan River in Perth. Over 1500 boys attend the school, including over 100 boarders, from Australia and overseas. The school is divided into the Preparatory School of approximately 500 boys from Pre Primary to Year 6 and the Senior School of approximately 1100 boys from Year 7 to 12. There is a strong emphasis on diversity and tolerance, encompassing boys from many different backgrounds, indigenous and non-indigenous, along with boys with special needs. The school’s mission ‘To Know, to Do, to Live with others and to Be’ highlights the importance of community and the spiritual side of humanity.

There is a strong culture of reading across the Preparatory School, which includes a book club of 25 to 30 boys, and a programme that incorporates state and national book awards.

The school also competes in the Readers' Cup each year, a statewide competition based on the Children's Book Council of Australia awards. Classes attend one or two lessons each week in the Library, focusing on literature promotion and information literacy. There is a large collection of book resources as well as online reference and information access available across the school and from home. The Preparatory School Library has one full time and one part time Teacher Librarian and two part time Library Technicians providing services to the boys and staff during the school day.

In a busy school such as Christ Church, with an enormous range of sport, music, artistic, and co-curricular activities in which the boys take part, some boys become caught up in other pursuits and choose not to read for leisure. It is these boys who are the main focus of this research.

Research Sample

The participants in this project include boys from Year 5 and Year 6 who are reluctant readers of fiction. Reluctant readers for the purpose of this research are judged to be capable of achieving average results or above in comprehension activities in the classroom and have no difficulty with the mechanics of reading. They do not have any learning disability that affects their reading skills but they admit themselves that they do not want to read for leisure. These boys are often quite intelligent and love sport or music or art, or enjoy a combination of these pursuits. Whatever free voluntary time they have, however, they do not use it to develop their reading.

Up to eight boys in each class group were invited to take part in the research. Boys who had previously read from e-readers were excluded from the research so that it included only boys experiencing reading with the use of this technology for the first time. In total, there were 22 Year 6 boys and 14 Year 5 boys. To take part in this research, boys had to first agree to participate in all activities associated with the project, and second, with their parents, sign a consent form giving permission for their opinions and pictures to be published and used to promote the research, while maintaining their anonymity.

Research Method

Overview

The project involved an action research approach, based on the experience and interpretation of responses to the issues being investigated (Stringer 2008). It provided the means to learn new insights into the students and gain positive outcomes for them through reflective practice, to develop and improve the teaching and learning programmes of the teacher/researcher (Mills 2011).

Design

Conducted within the boy's normal library programme, the research involved participants having access to e-readers for free reading while other boys read hard copy books. Participants were allowed to choose their own book title, and format of e-reader, a Kindle or iPod touch. They were also allowed to choose a place to read that was comfortable. It was felt that by giving participants a choice of content and environment, they would settle to their reading faster and have more chance of success. They were also given the option to change to the other form of e-reader if they asked to do so during the course of the research.

It was important that boys who were not involved in the research project were not disadvantaged through lack of involvement. These boys were given access to the e-readers at other times during lessons later in the term.

Assumptions

For the sake of this research, it was assumed that the participants had a reasonable working knowledge of hand held devices, or at least an interest in using e-readers that could be developed as needed. Class lessons involved the use of computers for searching and documenting information and with the abundance of mobile phones and electronic devices used by the average boy at the school, it was felt that these skills would be transferable at least in part to e-readers, facilitating their use for the research project.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This action research has provided the opportunity for the researcher to be a participant observer (Mills 2011). The main data collection included evidence gained through qualitative

techniques such as questionnaires, observations, interviews, journals and field notes along with video footage. Some quantitative evidence was also collected using survey techniques. The quantitative evidence was recorded in written terms rather than in visual explanation.

In the initial stage of the research, each boy participated in a five-minute interview with the purpose of developing individual profiles to ascertain whether the assumptions of the classroom teachers and the researcher were correct. While it was known that they were reluctant readers, it was important to be sure that the researcher's prediction about the use of technology and kinaesthetics was relevant with these particular boys. As they read hard copy books during their library lesson, the boys were asked simple questions about their reading and their responses were videoed.

The boys' next task was to complete a questionnaire on *surveymonkey.com* addressing their attitudes to reading, length of time they spent reading, experience in reading stories in different formats, number of books read in the past and favourite types of story. These factors would be compared against a post-research survey to establish change in enthusiasm and success.

The following step was to begin reading from Kindles and iPod touch and for the boys to record in journals how they felt about the process each time they read. Over the period of reading, boys were able to enter some meaningful notes into their journals.

After four weeks reading on whichever device the boys chose, interviews were held with two focus groups: one for Year 5 and one for Year 6. This allowed for interim analysis on the progress of the research (Hendricks, as cited in Mills, 2011, p. 125). The discussions emanating from the focus groups were lively and interesting, however, I found it left some boys vulnerable to peer pressure. It was decided at this point to structure the final evaluations as individual interviews to allow boys to respond openly and with freedom to express their opinions in whatever way they chose.

After the second set of four weeks of reading ebooks, the boys were more than happy to give feedback on the second questionnaire on *surveymonkey.com* and then to answer a few questions in individual interviews related to these responses, in order to clarify their comments (Mills 2011).

At the conclusion of the research, data collected were analysed through a process of categorising and coding. This meant identifying specific themes from observations, interviews, journals and surveys to illustrate aspects of similarity and difference and then sorting them into categories in areas of commonality or patterns to report on (Stringer 2008).

Themes such as attitude to reading, successes and difficulties in using e-readers, reading habits and length of time spent reading were the main focus and therefore student comments in these areas were categorised accordingly. Coding then took place to link students with similarities and differences and changes in behaviour and attitude. These were then analysed as to whether they were positive or negative, and the reasons for such.

Discussion of the Findings

Questionnaire

The initial questionnaire served to gauge the boys' reaction to reading as a leisure activity. Comments such as reading was "*boring*", and that they "*would rather be playing outside or on computer games*" highlighted the lack of enthusiasm the boys had for leisure reading. Other comments focused on parental and teacher expectations contributing to their lack of enthusiasm. However, the common factor was based on a lack of enjoyment of the reading experience.

Although the participants had access to the e-readers at any time, it should be noted that only two boys chose to access them during their 'free' time. Preference to be outdoors overshadowed the special privilege of being the only ones to access e-readers during lunchtime. This may be more a factor of the culture of the school and its busyness, rather than a response to free voluntary reading, but several of the participants noted that they would rather just play with their friends than come to the library to read.

Difficulties connected with the selection of ebooks contributed to some of the issues that affected, at the outset, both the interest level and the take up of e-readers. Choice of ebook titles was central to encouraging the boys to read. Initially, some of the titles requested were unavailable on the website used to purchase ebooks and access to titles by Australian or popular British authors was restricted. Using an e-reader to choose an ebook to read, allowed for anonymous choice of titles, a factor that boys commented on as being important.

Focus Groups

There was a very positive sense of enjoyment running through the focus groups. Boys discussed their ideas about reading and their newfound enthusiasm for reading, contributing opinions such as *“to be honest I don’t really like reading but I’m reading a lot more than I did. I read from the iPod touch and the technology makes me read more”*. Another said *“It’s fun!”* Some of the participants were not able to articulate why they liked reading an ebook, while others talked about using buttons and changing the font rotation, highlighting the kinaesthetic nature of ebooks and supporting what we know as important in boys’ learning/reading experiences (Highland Schools Virtual Libraries, 2010). An apt comment here was,

Now I like reading. It’s very electronic and you think you’re like a scientist instead of reading a book. I like selecting the pages. I like it how you can switch it around. It showed me that reading could be interesting. I love the kindle.

Other boys talked about the problem of losing their place in a book or losing the thread of the story when reading from a hard copy book. They appreciated the fact that an e-reader had built in bookmarks, and they could highlight where they had previously been reading. One boy said, *“It’s easier to read. You don’t have to find your page all the time flicking the pages, you can just click a button and find your page”*, while another agreed, *“It’s actually really good because you don’t lose your page.”*

The focus group sessions were valuable in collecting a quick but comprehensive view of the boys’ experience with e-readers. The boys discussed the many functions of the device they had learnt to control and several boys stated that this kept them motivated to *read on* in the story. One boy commented,

I’m not a very good reader, I’m very slow and I get annoyed reading. I used the iPod touch and Kindle. Now I know that you can read on something else (other than a hard copy book) that’s easier to read. When you turn the page you can just click a button and you can change the font size. I enjoy it more.

However, for a small number of boys the portability was more appealing to them, particularly when using the iPod. One boy said, *“I used the iPod touch. You can just carry it in your pocket all the time”*. Some boys had begun reading on their siblings’ iPods at home and this helped in keeping them focused on reading for leisure.

The Year 6 group discussed many benefits and differences between hard copy books and

ebooks. A comment from one of the boys stated, *“I actually enjoy coming to Library now. Using the Kindle has made me decide that reading can be exciting after all”*. This boy went on to read more consistently and was observed in the library browsing the shelves more often, searching for titles he would like to read.

Journals

After each reading session, the boys wrote in their journals about their reading experience. Although what they wrote contributed only a little to my understanding of whether or not e-readers have heightened their experience and desire to read for leisure, Participant A wrote, *“I am reading more now because reading on the Kindle makes me want to read”* while Participant B wrote, *“They (e-readers) are really cool but they are fiddly”*. Participant C wrote, *“I don’t really like reading, but I enjoy reading off the Kindle.”* However, several participants concurred with one of the boys who commented, *“I don’t really like reading on a Kindle. It’s too hard to read.”* A quiet student, Participant F, noted, *“I had a lot of fun on the Kindle. It is a lot easier than a book (to read) but I still think it would be better with a touch screen.”* A final comment was from Participant G who wrote, *“The iPod is like a pocket book. I’m loving it.”*

These comments raised an important question: ‘Is the popularity of using e-readers more related to technology or have the boys become hooked, through the technology, on the story?’ Indeed, rephrasing the question, it could be asked, ‘Does it matter if boys focus on the mechanical components of reading, as long as they are engaged in the reading experience?’

Individual Interviews

The individual interviews were used to verify comments made by boys in the surveys. The boys were overwhelmingly positive when discussing their opinions about reading from Kindles and iPod touch.

A poignant statement from a boy who struggles socially with his peer group, perhaps more than any other piece of evidence, illustrates the change that e-readers made to his confidence and enjoyment of reading. He notes, *“I didn’t like reading but now I love it. I think I’m better at reading now. The Kindle is really fun. It encouraged me to read.”*

Prior to his participation in the research, he refused to read fiction at school or to borrow books from the library. After the research, he announced, with a huge smile, that his parents had just bought him a Kindle and that he likes reading with it. At the same time, he was also reading the *Alex Rider* series by Anthony Horowitz in hard copy. This was a major step forward for this boy; a step taken after his experience with the Kindle. His success has also brought on a changed relationship between student and teacher. This resonates with research by Guthrie (2001) on reading engagement and attitude.

Other boys in the study were very positive about their changed attitude to reading. One boy observed,

I'm reading a lot more because I just saw the Skulduggery books. I have now read two of the Skulduggery books I saw on the Kindles. I read part of The Faceless Ones and it made me desperate to read.

Another boy, a very confident speaker but reluctant reader, remarked, *“from reading the Kindle I get confident. It somehow makes me read faster.”* A boy nearby was very frank in saying, *“I didn't read too well but it's (the Kindle) helped me quite a lot. It made me read a bit more”*.

A real change in attitude came from a boy who had initially commented, *“Reading is a waste of time”*. He followed this up with, *“I do sport instead, but I like Kindles. It's good to press the button to change the page. I enjoy it (reading) more because you can do things with your hands (on the Kindle).”* Perhaps in time, the e-reader experience will become part of his leisure time activity.

Observations

Boys were very engaged when reading on ebooks and often asked to read for longer, rather than go onto other activities. As a participant observer, I noticed a commitment from a lot of these boys that was previously unseen.

Participants were quite relaxed reading from ebooks and requested to lie on the floor; sit under tables in the dark and away from noise; read outside in the sun; and in other informal environments. I also noticed that they didn't waste time choosing a title when popular ones

were available and they were quick to begin reading, unlike the process they undertook when borrowing from the library shelves. This highlighted their enthusiasm for reading ebooks and many boys were keen to share their stories at the end. This brought about another question in the mind of the researcher, “Is it easier in some way for certain boys to choose a title with e-reader technology, than on the traditional library shelf?”

Conclusion

The findings of the research were very positive overall in terms of most participants wholeheartedly enjoying the experience of reading ebooks. They were motivated to read and successfully manipulated the e-readers giving them confidence in the reading process. It was a delight to see boys teaching others how to manage a search for part of the story on the ebook. Only a small proportion of the participants, perhaps four or five out of a total of 36 boys, indicated they were less than happy to read ebooks and this was more out of indifference than any clearly stated negative aspects.

This project has undoubtedly shown that ebooks can enhance boys’ enthusiasm for reading and should be considered in any school library program, but particularly in reading for leisure.

Implications of the Study on Practice

E-readers will be made available through the school library for all students and the success of this research will be communicated to teachers and parents in an effort to engage all boys more, particularly reluctant readers, in the reading process and reading for leisure.

A procedure for the lending of ebooks will be drawn up so that students are able to take ebooks home to read in their leisure time. This will be a fair and equitable process for all students, not just those who took part in the research project.

A procedure will be investigated in the future to enable students to use their own e-readers to borrow ebooks from the school library collection and read them on their own Kindles and iPod touch or other devices. This will be developed as soon as possible to capitalise on the enthusiasm this research has generated within the school.

Implications for Future Research

The length of time given to this research was relatively short and, whilst participants were tracked over two blocks of four weeks, it would be worthwhile following them into the future to ascertain whether or not their interest in reading for pleasure can be sustained through ebooks and, if indeed, their leisure activity habits include reading.

One difficulty during this research project was the lack of titles available by some well-known authors. For a project such as this to be more successful in the future, a greater range of titles need to be published in ebook format, particularly the more popular ones.

Pressing buttons and manipulating the e-reader spurred many boys on to continue reading and one boy found he read faster. A more complex study linked to psychology could be undertaken to gauge the effects of kinaesthetic factors, such as pushing buttons while reading the ebook, on the engagement with the story being read. The question ‘Does it matter if boys focus on mechanical components, as long as they are engaged in the reading experience?’ could be an adjunct to this research.

Final Comment

After the research was complete it was wonderful to consider the comments from classroom teachers and parents who contacted me about some of these boys who had started reading in spare time for the first time ever or tackled more complicated novels in their reading. Their increased interest in reading transferred to their class lessons, giving them confidence and enthusiasm to be involved in literature discussions (a highlight in itself).

If teachers hope to encourage reading as a significant activity in the lives of children, to make reading pleasurable (Strommen & Mates 2004) and to give them enthusiasm and success in the task, the move towards e-readers needs to be fully investigated as part of a library programme. The words of a reluctant reader who participated in the research give all the incentive needed to continue this project to the next stage; *“I am reading more now because reading on the Kindle makes me want to read.”*

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Reflection

This IBSC Research gave me the impetus to do something worthwhile and research-based within my school. So often we follow the research of others around the world without documenting and working with our own assumptions as teaching practitioners. Involvement in this project has given me the prime opportunity to investigate my long-standing hypothesis about the effect of technology on boys' reading.

I would like to acknowledge the support from my school to be offered such a tremendous experience. This has been an immense bonus in my career and I thank my Headmaster and school for not only allowing me to be involved, but also for their encouragement along the way. I would also like to acknowledge the support and collegiality of the Head of the Senior Library, especially with IT assistance in the beginning, and his willingness to bounce ideas and chat along the way.

Looking back over the year's project, I remember the looks on boys' faces and the enthusiasm they showed about being involved in the project. This apart from any other progress they made was enough to keep me focused. I have learnt a great deal about the boys from the whole process, but especially from group and individual interviews. I'll use some of the research methods employed in this project more often in my own evaluation of teaching and learning in the future.

An important part of the research was the collaboration of other members of my global team who were willing to share their ideas in open forums, both the experienced and less experienced members of the team. The shared knowledge gave me a chance to reflect on my own plans and to improve my focus along the way.

To my dynamic team leader Linda, always ready to assist, thank you for your leadership and flexibility in bringing this to conclusion. Your guidance was invaluable.