Digital Literacies

e-Reading and e-Responding: New Tools for the Next Generation of Readers

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Contemporary transformations in digital technologies have prompted a reassessment of what literacy means; hence, the definition of what constitutes "text" is rapidly changing (Kress, 2003). Traditionally, text has been perceived as written messages and symbols in the forms of books, magazines, and newspapers. Today, text is recognized as much more than written words or images. Evans (2005) described a text as

> a unit of communication that may take the form of something written down but also a chunk of discourse, for example speech, a conversation, a radio program, a TV advert, text messaging, a photo in a newspaper, and so on. (p. 8)

As teachers and researchers consider the need to expand the definition of text, we should remember that today's readers are immersed in multimodal experiences and, consequently, have a keen awareness of the possibility of combining modes and media to receive and communicate messages. This awareness results in an urgent need for teachers and researchers to address the discrepancy between the types of literacy experiences students encounter at school (paper, pencil, and print texts), and those they practice in their daily lives outside the school environment (Web 2.0). One way to bridge such incongruity is to expand the types of texts students are exposed to and engaged with at school by turning attention to electronic books, or e-books.

Features of e-Books

e-Books have been available for over a decade, but researchers have only recently begun to evaluate the quality, benefits, and possibilities of this form of reading (Shamir & Korat, 2006). These books are available in forms ranging from toy-inspired books, CD-ROM storybooks, online texts, and downloadable books and documents. Much like traditional books, the electronic versions embrace print and illustrations but are viewed on desktop computers, laptops, or handheld reading devices. To explore various types of e-books, visit the websites presented in Table 1.

Many e-books employ multimodal features—such as video, audio, and hyperlinks—as well as interactive tools. Such tools invite readers to physically interact with the text through inserting, deleting, or replacing text; marking passages by highlighting, underlining, or crossing out words; adding comments by inserting notes, attaching files, or recording audio comments; and manipulating the page format, text size, and screen layout. Search features allow the

Table 1   e-Reading Resources

BooksOnBoard: www.booksonboard.com

Children's Books Online/The Rosetta Project: www.editec.net

eBooks.com: www.ebooks.com

Fictionwise: www.fictionwise.com

Octavo: www.octavo.com

Project Gutenberg: www.gutenberg.org

TumbleBooks: www.tumblebooks.com

user to locate specific words or phrases within the text or access a particular page. Although research on the use of this medium is in its infancy, the results appear promising in supporting electronic texts as a means to foster literacy development and, in particular, reading comprehension (Larson, 2007, 2008).

e-Book Reading and Responding

Integrating e-books into an otherwise traditional literacy program is an effective move toward new literacies instruction. Recently, I observed 10 fifth-grade students reading electronic versions of two award-winning books by Christopher Paul Curtis: *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999) and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* (1996). None of the students had prior experience with e-books, yet 8 reported in a prereading survey that they were in favor of the upcoming experience, making statements such as, "I'm looking forward to it because trying new things is something I like to do." One student expressed a neutral attitude: "It sounds really fun but in another way it sounds really weird." Another student was strongly opposed to the idea: "I would rather read a book that was not on the computer." While reading, all 10 students interacted with the text through the use of a wide variety of e-book tools including the highlighter and note tool.

During the first few sessions, the fifth graders (who were used to taking Accelerated Reader quizzes) highlighted what they anticipated would be included on a formal comprehension quiz. Gradually, as they learned that no such assessments were planned, they began using the highlighter in unique ways that reflected their personalities and individual reading styles. In some cases, students marked passages that

they later wanted to address during class discussions or in small-group conversations. They also highlighted funny, interesting, or unusual expressions such as "woop, zoop, sloop" and "the thing was positively alive with germs!" (from *Bud, Not Buddy*). Derogatory terms, including vulgar and insulting expressions— "Shut the hell up and enjoy the damn cookies" (from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*)—were also popular. In an interview, one student explained that highlighting the characters' names helped him "keep track of who is who."

Many e-books allow for markups or annotations by the reader. The fifth graders I observed inserted sticky notes in response to the text. For example, the note in Figure 1 captured the reader's thought process in the form of a personal query and was placed directly on the page in close proximity to the relevant passage. When annotating, students did not concern themselves with proper writing conventions and mechanics but rather focused on transferring their thoughts onto paper as quickly and effectively as possible. Students often used invented spellings, letter and number substitutions, and emoticons: "Poor him...he brought it on himself, 2 bad 4 u."

The notes also recorded perceptions about evolving events—"Joey and Grandma sound like they would get along"—and predicted future happenings—"If Bud hurries he could catch up with Bugs in Grand Rapids maybe." At times, responses indicated a lack of understanding or a desire for additional information. Such responses were often in the form of single questions that were consistently positioned right next to the confusing text passage: "Why is he playing and wasting his time?" "What might the codes mean?" Most of the notes reflected students' spontaneity and impulsiveness. Statements were short with a conversational tone; readers offered personal commentaries as the story unfolded: "He has a point!" "Don't do it!!!" "R u sure about that?" The note tool provided students with a literature-response mechanism that suited their individual needs and purposes as readers. By using the note tool, they engaged in new literacy practices by envisioning new ways to access their thought processes to engage in spontaneous, instantaneous response to the e-books.

Figure 1 Example of a Student's Use of e-Book Note and Highlight Text Tools
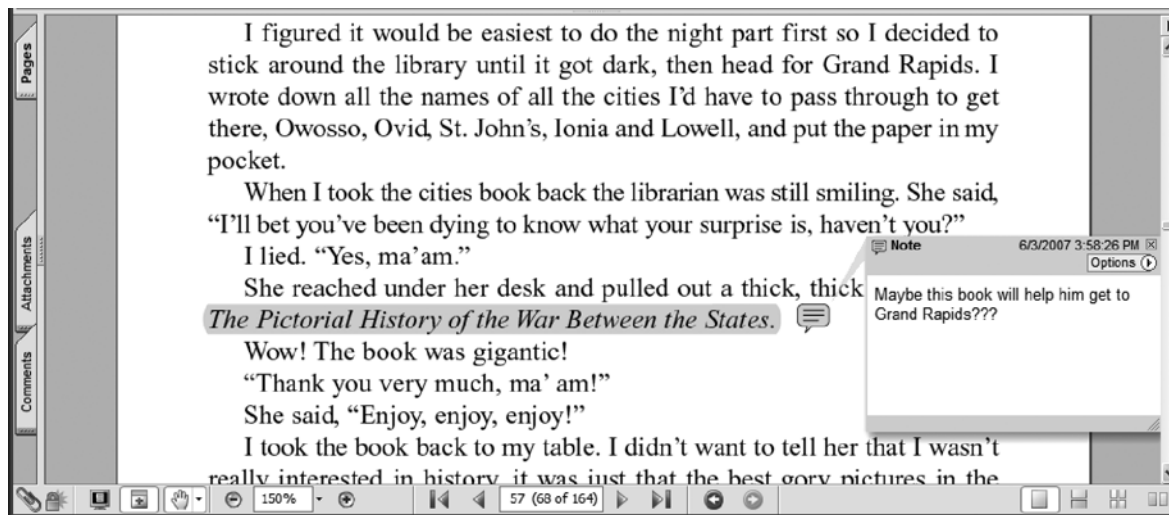
In the end, all 10 fifth graders reported that they preferred reading e-books over traditional books, and they positively described their use of e-book tools: "I would rather read an e-book [than a regular book] because there are so many cool tools to use and choose from. I still haven't used them all, and I'm done with the book." The tools, in addition to being perceived as fun and motivating, encouraged readers to actively engage with the text.

Rosenblatt's (1938/1995) transactional theory of reader response explains that each reader breathes life into the text through personal meaning making and individual experiences. e-Books clearly offer new opportunities and extended possibilities for personal interpretation of and engagement with texts (Hancock, 2008; Larson, 2009).

Closing Thoughts

As exemplified in this small study, the possibilities of e-books in schools are exhilarating and endless. To explore how new literacies can be integrated into more traditional reading programs, I ask the preservice teachers enrolled in my language arts methods course to download and read e-book versions of notable children's books. I am often met with initial reluctance. Recognizing that the majority of preservice teachers are relatively young—typically in their early 20s—and are avid technology users in their daily lives, their trepidation about e-books may seem surprising. But I have come to realize that they object not to the e-book itself but rather to the means of delivery—glaring screens and stationary computers. They view e-book reading as inconvenient and restrictive, miss the portability of a regular book, and resent staring at a computer screen at a desk rather than snuggling up on a couch.

Fortunately, promising new technologies offer additional ways of reading and interacting with electronic texts. A wide range of portable devices (i.e., the Amazon Kindle, Sony's Reader Digital Book, iPods, PDAs, and even some cell phones) are easily transportable and offer instant access to thousands of books through wireless capabilities. As these new technologies continue to grow, I look forward to additional studies and explorations in this area—both in teacher education programs and K–12 classrooms.

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