Empowering Students with Digital Reading

New products are designed to improve aptitude, fulfill Common Core State Standards, provide unlimited access to online libraries and bring 21st-century learning into the classroom.

By:
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Using myON Reader to access more than 2,500 online books, a third grader at Charles Pinckney Elementary in the Charleston County (S.C.) School District can read any book that targets her interest and reading ability.

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When Connie Dopierala was hired as the media services administrator for the Charleston County (S.C.) School District, one of her tasks was to update the district's library books. "I was shocked by how dated some of the books were," she says. "One school had a biography on Nelson Mandela that was written while he was still in prison."

Some of the younger librarians suggested buying digital books, but Dopierala was skeptical. "I wanted to prove that kids still love having books in their hands," she says. As a pilot program, the district purchased 206 digital books for the 2010-2011 school year and measured how often the books were read. Dopierala says the results blew her away. By the end of the school year, those 206 books had been accessed more than 101,000 times by K12 students all over the district. One Title I elementary school had accessed the books 58,000 times.

"The kids were basically voting with the mouse, and they were voting for digital," Dopierala says. "I realized that this is the medium for their generation. It's the medium of the future."

With a coming wave of new digital reading products designed to improve aptitude and provide unlimited access to online libraries, school districts have various options to help bring 21st-century learning in the classroom.

Some teachers and librarians say that digital reading products can personalize learning for struggling students and help interest young readers in nonfiction books, which are a major component in the Common Core State Standards Initiative designed to strengthen current state standards. As school districts across the country struggle under the weight of budget cuts, however, school administrators will need to be creative in finding funding sources.

Digital Reading: Find the Best Fit

PRODUCT *	HOW IT WORKS	TYPE OF ASSESSMENT
Amazon's Kindle e-Reader	A reading table allows access to an unlimited library of thousands of down-loadable books available for children.	The program does not include assessme
American Reading Company's Action 100 software	A 12-step Response-to-Intervention model prompts momentum in low-performing schools and helps all students read at grade level.	Students read 60 minutes per day, and Sc Pace, a student tracking system based o Common Core State Standards, tracks re proficiency levels.
Apple's iBooks application	An application allows access to a library of thousands of downloadable books for children of all ages, many of which are free.	The program does not include assessme
Capstone Digital's myON reader software	Designed to improve reading skills for children in grades pre-K through 8. Students have unlimited access to an online library of more than 2,000 books.	Teachers can measure a child's progress through quizzes and benchmark assessm They can also track how often and how r a child reads.
Curriculum Associates' i-Ready Diagnostic & Instruction app	Offers one-to-one attention to acceler-ate learning. The Instruction compo-nent includes more than 600 interactive lessons for students and downloadable PDFs for teachers.	The instant detailed reporting tool addres Common Core State Standards. Diagnost results are automatically translated into easy-to-understand reports for teachers administrators by grade level and domain district, school, grade, class and student
Lexia Learning's Assessment Without Testing software	Aims to improve reading skills by focusing on fluency, vocabulary and comprehension for pre-K12. Provides accelerated reading development for at-risk students in grades 4-12.	Teachers can measure progress at the di school, grade and individual student leve then compare it to national standards.

_Download 'Digital Reading: Find the Best Fit'_The digital book market will likely grow as more Americans purchase tablet computers and other digital reading devices. One study from the Pew Research Center shows that the number of adults who own tablet computers rose from 10 percent to 19 percent between mid-December 2011 and early January. The same surge in growth occurred with e-book readers as well, which also jumped from 10 percent to 19 percent over the same time period.

The Cooney Center, an independent research organization focused on how digital media technology impacts children's learning, is currently conducting a study with 24 families to determine whether young children prefer e-books to regular books. Results are expected to be released later this spring.

Carl Harvey, president of the American Association of School Libraries and a librarian at North Elementary School in Noblesville, Ind., says that librarians will have to adapt and expand their skill sets as libraries adopt new technology. Depending on what types of digital learning programs are used in a district, librarians may need to know how to help children find the right e-books through online libraries, help them navigate online reading programs, or solve problems on iPads and other tablet computers. Harvey says that understanding new technology is a key component in the future role of librarians.

"Librarians will always be an essential part of a school, but we'll have to become more technologically savvy," he says. "It's all part of the evolution. [Technology] is another tool we can utilize to get more kids reading."

MyON Reader Takes Off

Impressed with the results of its digital book experiment, the Charleston County district last summer invested in Capstone Digital's new myON Reader for its elementary and middle schools. Launched in 2011, myON is a personalized Web-based reading program that provides access to more than 2,500 online books. Available for students in pre-K through grade 8, the program is customized to a child's interest and reading ability, which is measured through a series of assessment quizzes.

MyON also develops an individual profile for each student based on interests and then generates a recommended book list. Teachers and administrators can see how often a child reads and track the student's growth through automatic benchmark assessments.

According to Dopierala, students in Charleston County devoured 26,000 books through myON reader within the first month of the school year. A large and diverse school district, Charleston County has roughly 45,000 students in 80 schools. Dopierala says that the district is still assessing overall improvements on standardized tests, but she has already seen gains in students' reading and writing abilities.

Todd Brekhus, president of Capstone Digital, says that myON is "an excellent form of personalized learning because students have their own choice of content and access to a library of thousands of books anytime, anywhere."

Brekhus says that myON is now in more than 1,100 schools nationwide. The cost for school districts averages to around $15 per student, which provides students with unlimited access to a library of more than 2,000 books. MyON plans soon to expand its library, and this year it will launch mobile applications for the iPhone and Android.

Jennifer Thrift, a librarian at Charles Pinckney Elementary School in Charleston County, says that digital reading programs can offer an interactive experience—with animated characters, colorful puzzles, and other engaging activities—that speaks to a generation of computer users. She believes that myON is especially beneficial for struggling students because they can read books below their grade level without the embarrassment of other students seeing what they're reading. In turn, advanced students can read above their grade level.

In another benefit, Thrift says, boys are reading more than ever since the school launched myON last year. From the science of baseball to the workings of the human body, young boys have been choosing nonfiction books that spark their interest.

While students eat up the digital books, Thrift doesn't believe that regular books will ever disappear entirely. "Students still love their physical books, but many of our children are going to want that interactive reading experience, and we [librarians] are going to have to adapt," she says. "It's the wave of the future."

Other Options

MyON is just one of many reading programs aimed at moving classrooms into the digital age. School districts today have a range of choices and specific services to meet the various needs of students.

For teachers focused on early childhood education, Rowland Reading Foundation's Super Kids Reading Program features a core digital reading program designed for K2. The program features online games and interactive library books that can be read at home, as well as assessments.

For those looking for more comprehensive assessments, Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reader offers four types of quizzes: reading practice, vocabulary practice, literacy skills and textbook quizzes. The program, for grades pre-K through 12, allows students to read books at their own pace and then take the series of quizzes.

Justin Lim, an English teacher at Rosemead High School in California's El Monte Union High School District, says that the Scholastic Read 180 program has helped his struggling students, especially the English language learners. The program places students at appropriate reading levels and prompts them to read passages and vocabulary words aloud, a method called "putting miles on the tongue," which was coined by Kate Kinsella, co-author of the READ180 program and leading ELL researcher.

For Lim, a former Teacher of the Year for his district, personalized instruction is essential for struggling readers. "The only way to really teach reading is to effectively tailor it to the students at their level," he says.

In 2011, Scholastic launched READ 180 Next Generation, an updated program that includes a larger library of nonfiction e-books, as well as new writing software designed to help students improve their writing skills.

This June, literacy publisher MindPlay will launch its MindPlay Virtual Reading Coach, a new curriculum for K12 designed to help students improve their reading skills by differentiating instruction. With MindPlay, students will have their own virtual reading specialist to help them read along at their own pace.

One school is even replacing textbooks with e-book readers. At Clearwater High School in the Pinellas County (Fla.) School System, school officials purchased 2,500 Kindles for the 2010-2011 school year and have since essentially stopped purchasing textbooks, according to The Tennessean newspaper. The first textbooks to be downloaded to the Kindle were the math textbooks. School officials reported a 6 percent jump in math scores in grades 9 to 12 after a year.

This school year, the district has ordered about 1,000 Kindle Fires, the tablet computer version of the Kindle e-book reader. The Kindle Fires are used along with regular Kindles.

Professional Development

As the demand for digital reading grows, so do the needs for professional development for teachers and for comprehensive assessments to determine whether the programs are working, says Julie Coiro, a professor in the School of Education at the University of Rhode Island and chair of the Technology, Literacy and Communication Committee of the International Reading Association. The committee works to promote computers and related technologies as tools for improving the quality of reading instruction for children.

Coiro says that school districts will also need to invest in professional development for teachers, including working with teachers to develop a comprehensive instruction plan as well as assessments to determine if students are using the technology in productive ways. Coiro also believes there needs to be more research to determine the long-term impact of using digital books. For example, she says there is a concern that students who are accustomed to using only highly engaging digital books may have trouble transitioning to regular "flat text" books. "Kids learn differently," she says. "We still aren't sure if this is something that will work for every kid."

Finding Funding

Coiro says that there is also the issue of the digital divide. Wealthier districts have the funds and freedom to experiment with new programs, while districts in low-income areas are limited.

At St. Mary Parish Public School District in Louisiana, a second-grader at W.P. Foster Elementary School uses Reading Assistant, the digital reading and audio program, which is especially beneficial to special ed students. Each student works at his or her own pace and ability. School officials at the Indiana Department of Education found a solution to the digital divide through government funding for after-school programs. Dre Knox, who works in the division of grants management at the Indiana Department of Education, heard about myON reader last year and thought it would be an excellent addition to the state's 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The centers are part of a nationwide government program for after-school enrichment in high-poverty neighborhoods.

Last year, the state was able to secure 21st Century federal grant money to launch myON in 25 of its after-school 21st Century Community Learning programs, which serve more than 5,500 children. Knox says that children in these programs read 18,000 books just in the month of November. "The teachers and kids love it," he says. "So far, we've had nothing but positive feedback."

St. Mary Parish Public School District of 9,600 students in Centerville, La., has been using Scientific Learning's Reading Assistant since 2008 with great results, school officials say. The district has worked to pull together funding from multiple sources, including Title I, technology grants and internal sources to keep the program afloat, says Lenny Armato, a supervisor of special education.

Armato says that the digital reading and audio program has been especially beneficial for the district's special education students. The program, designed to help strengthen fluency, comprehension and vocabulary, allows students to read at their own pace and then lets them go back and listen to a recording of themselves reading the text. Struggling readers of all ages work on Reading Assistant 10 to 15 minutes a day.

Reading Assistant is part of the larger Fast ForWord program. Since launching Fast ForWord in 2006 and adding Reading Assistant in 2008, school officials say they've seen a significant improvement by fourth-grade students on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program, a state standardized test that requires a score of basic or higher in English.

From 2006 to 2010, the percentage of fourth-graders performing at or above the basic level in English increased from 55 percent to 78 percent. In 2008, St. Mary Parish, a diverse district where 67 percent of students qualify for

the free and reduced-price meal program, exceeded the state average for the percentage of fourth-graders reading at or above the basic level in English.

"We've found [Reading Assistant and Fast ForWord] to be a worthwhile investment," Armato says. "We'll keep working to find the funding."