E-books: Innovation or Interruption to Learning?

When I first heard about “eBooks” in sixth grade, I decided to download the iBooks app out of curiosity, eagerly thinking that I was about to join an exclusive club of e-readers. I downloaded the first free book that came up, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and started reading it. However, after about twenty minutes of reading, I discovered that I had been merely skimming the words as I mindlessly scrolled, barely comprehending the plot. I had always loved to read, but the change in format somehow upset my concentration. After that realization, I abandoned the idea of eBooks and returned to my regular habit of reading paper books.

Years later, I am now a college student taking classes that use a variety of print and electronic textbooks and resources. I still retain my preference for paper books that I solidified at age twelve, but out of necessity I read the electronic sources provided. Since many students are confronted with this dilemma of choosing between print and electronic sources, I began investigating whether reading digital books affects reading comprehension and learning ability and other advantages and disadvantages of reading electronically. Although e-books are often viewed negatively, they are effective learning tools when used for research and study. However, electronically formatted sources should not entirely replace print books because there are significant disadvantages when used in extended reading.

Since many students today access electronic textbooks for various courses, it begs the question of whether learning and comprehension is at all affected by the difference in media. A study comparing students who used print textbooks to those who used e-textbooks found that “their grades and cognitive learning did not reach statistical significance.” This study continues to say that students who read the information electronically reported higher rates of perceived learning and a more positive attitude towards the material than those who used print (Rockinson-
Szapkiw et al. 264). Another study mentioned that elementary students called reading electronically “more enjoyable” than using print (Wright et al. 374). The correlation of enjoyment with electronic reading most likely relates to the association with the popularity of using technology for connecting with friends. This was the primary reason I attempted to read the eBook in sixth grade; I perceived it was the trendy thing to do because it was a recent advance in technology.

Some additional features that draw students to electronic texts were included in several articles. In one study, students listed lowered costs, portability, improved researching, and benefits to the environment (Lopatovska et al. 271). Another article stated that e-books have several advantages such as smaller size, accessibility, easier ways to search, and easy operability (Liaw and Huang 626). One commonality between these studies is the convenience and accessibility, as all it takes is a few keystrokes for the sources to appear on the screen, and there are an infinite number of articles that can be viewed from one electronic device.

A significant advantage to electronic books is that they aid the learning of disabled students. Since online textbooks have changeable features, they can be adapted to different learners, such as increasing the print size and links to dictionary definitions and pronunciations. When disabled students used these sources, they “found them more accessible, enjoyable, and empowering than traditional books, and they learned reading comprehension more effectively (Behrmann 87). In this sense, e-books are useful because they facilitate easier learning for disabled students who normally struggle to comprehend print books.

Although electronic sources are helpful in some cases, many experts have noted the difference in how books are read between the different formats. According to Dorothy Mikuska and Marti Seaton, using the Internet results in frequent interruptions and “power-browsing” to
satisfy readers’ appetite for “immediacy and efficiency,” and readers can also feel rushed from the scroller and page-turning features on an e-reading device. They go on to say, “Reading fast from an eBook, we miss a great deal of the experience of reading” (32-33). These assertions suggest that reading from an electronic device takes away from the quintessential reading experience.

One aspect of e-books that could detract from learning is the possibility of distractions. A notable study comparing students who read either electronic or print texts showed that test scores were similar in both situations, but reading electronically resulted in longer reading times and higher reports of multitasking (Daniel and Woody 18). Personally, I am easily sidetracked when I read an online source because of the availability of other activities such as social media and email. Contrarily, when reading a print source, I remain more focused because of the limited availability of these interruptions. Although my phone and laptop might be nearby, my reading material is separate from the screen and thus the distraction is reduced.

Many arguments exist for the need for a balance between print and electronic formats because of these differences. Norm Medeiros recommended that “at best electronic copies [should be] used as a complement to print, but not as a replacement” (7). Furthermore, in a study of graduate students, the majority said they would use both electronic and print formats, skimming the e-books for relevancy and then accessing the print copy (Wu and Chen 302). It also found that these students do not read e-books in the same way they read print, as they rarely read an entire e-book from start to finish. Instead, they browse for key words and then read a few chapters (Wu and Chen 305). Since students wanted to use both formats, it can be assumed that they recognized the positives and negatives of each and adjusted the uses of them accordingly.
They most likely used the e-books for quick access and convenience and the print books for more comprehensive reading.

Mikuska and Seaton further argue the most beneficial uses of electronic and print reading, stating that electronic sources should be used for “efferent reading,” or focusing on content, and print should be used for “aesthetic reading,” or focusing on the form and message (35-36). Another study showed that while students are generally against using e-books for extended reading, they are receptive to using them to “search for a specific answer and for reference purposes” (Abdullah and Gibb 688). In both cases, it suggests using e-books to seek for specific information and shorter reading whereas print books should be used for comprehensive purposes and longer reading.

Based on this evidence, electronic sources are not inherently bad and generally do not detract from overall learning and comprehension. Electronic and print books both have distinct advantages and disadvantages that make them better suited for different types of reading. While electronic sources can be beneficial for research, print books are preferable to e-books for extended reading. Moreover, knowledge can be gained regardless of the format of the text, but if we allow electronic books to completely replace print, a valuable part of society and learning will be lost.


