

# Last Child in the Library?

## A Survey of Use of E-books versus Traditional Books

CLAUDIA MCVICKER

*Do kids even read books anymore? Don't kids just read on tablets these days? Why do we still have libraries?*

Those flip remarks can be heard in many communities these days, from large cities to rural areas. But contemporary librarians should not fear. Recent reports of books being obsolete have been greatly exaggerated. One recent survey found that digital natives still prefer real books to electronic ones on their tablets.<sup>1</sup>

With the advent of one-to-one tablet initiatives in the public schools, tablet usage in the classroom has become increasingly widespread. The essentials of reading instruction have recently and rapidly changed with the appearance of tablets in elementary schools. Although recent tablet research reports describe their many educational benefits, e-book reading has yet to be realized and formally evaluated.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the possible benefits of tablets, research is lacking that supports the enthusiastic claims that they will “revolutionize” education.<sup>3</sup> Even so, it is not surprising that teachers and students alike rushed to use tablets for reading. Hoping for improved comprehension during electronic-text reading, a

serious question from teachers has emerged: is reading better or worse in e-books?

There has been a sense of urgency to prove reading books on tablets is better. After all, the children of the twenty-first century love tablets and technology in general. Fittingly, it must be valuable to learn and read on one. School classrooms are purchasing e-books in lieu of more expensive traditional books and anthologies.<sup>4</sup>

Now teachers, librarians, and some parents have lingering questions. Is it better to have students read exclusively on tablets? Are e-books less or more comprehensible than traditional books? Should students be required to do one or the other? What do kids prefer and should they be allowed to choose?

### Who Are Digital Natives?

Children in elementary schools today belong to the digital-native generation—those who were born during the age of digital technology and have been familiar with computers, smartphones, tablets, and the internet from an early age.<sup>5</sup>



*Claudia McVicker is an associate professor and reading researcher at William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, whose research has always studied young readers' spontaneous response to literature. Her most recent study investigated the format preferences, traditional vs. electronic books, of nearly one hundred ten-year-olds. The results of this research have been accepted for presentation at international and national literacy conferences in 2017 and 2018.*



"I read iBooks for fun and tBooks for Reading Workshop in school."

Aware of this, teachers and researchers recognize that proliferation of tablets in the classroom will only keep accelerating. With these powerful mobile devices come a lot of possible benefits for teachers and students alike. Current research delineates the benefits in the K–12 classroom.

One such research study, conducted in a kindergarten, found students using tablets scored much higher on literacy tests than students that didn't use the device.<sup>6</sup>

Tablet technology in the classroom can be a powerful tool for learning. Utilizing it for e-book reading was a natural leap for most elementary classrooms where teaching students to read and improving reading skills is how teachers spend the majority of their instructional day. Some schools have even stopped using any paper and pencils of any kind.

## E-books or Traditional Books?

Much has been written in support of reading e-books, and we already know what is effective for reading traditional books. But the effects of a book's format on reading should be considered. Louise Rosenblatt's foundational transactional theory of reading states that the reader, the text, and the poem (a metaphor for the context), make up the reading act.<sup>7</sup>

This means readers bring their experiential background to a book, interacting with the text's content and make meaning from within the context. Reader, text, and context simultaneously interact in every reader's transaction with text.

In my recent research,<sup>8</sup> the contextual setting was a traditional book in the hands of the reader or an e-book on a tablet. To better understand children's preferences and reading behaviors with tablet e-books, my recent study sought to compare the two, informed by digital natives themselves—fourth-grade students.

## Plugged and Unplugged Reading

Five classrooms of fourth-grade students, who are independent readers and have read a wide range of traditional books since kindergarten, participated. The responses of ninety-four fourth graders in four classrooms in a school district on the west side of Kansas City, Kansas, were collected and analyzed. They were also surveyed to determine their perspectives on reading, such as viewing it as an academic pursuit, recreational activity, or a combination of the two.

Then the students passed through three phases. During the first phase, every student read a traditional book (unplugged reading). In the second phase, tablets were introduced into the classroom, and all students read an e-book (plugged reading). All students completed a tablet-usage survey, which found that all but a handful had prior experiences with tablets in their homes, but not in school. They reported they used tablets for games, video viewing, and other activities. Although a handful had read on a tablet, most had no knowledge of being able to read a book on a tablet.

After the first two phases, small focus groups were held to allow young readers to provide their insight and opinions about the two formats. At the end of each conversation, they made a choice for phrase three—reading an e-book or a traditional book. Surprisingly, the students did not hesitate to answer. Each had clear and distinct preferences for one or the other, as I'll discuss below.

## Plugged Reading: Pros and Cons

As we move forward into the twenty-first century, we need to allow digital natives to read in electronic formats. As I will describe below, students as young as fourth grade can already articulate why they prefer it. They want to read e-books because they are so familiar with viewing information on a screen.

Remember, digital natives grew up with computer technology and are fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the internet. Reading electronic text feels natural for them, unlike for those of us who are digital immigrants—not born into a digital world.<sup>9</sup>

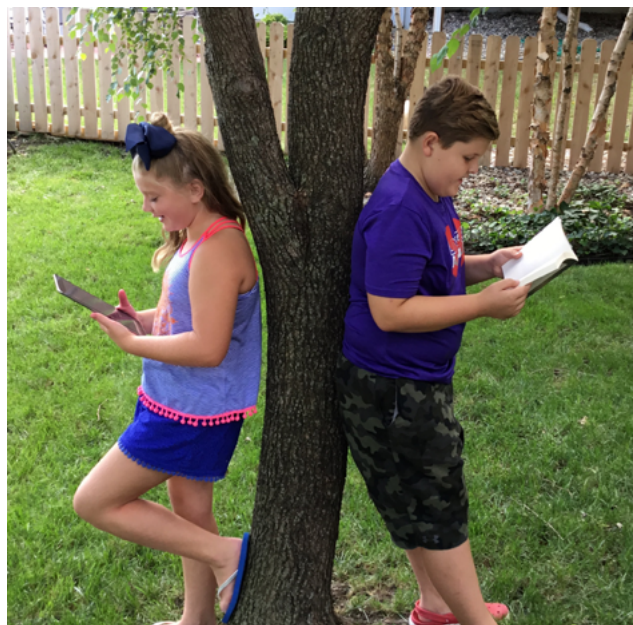
Today's children want and expect features like highlighting, immediate definition pop-ups for unknown words, and bookmarking for their reading. Most students in my study located these within minutes of being introduced to an e-book. They are quick to explore an app or screen to discover what it might have to offer.

Digital natives inherently understand the convenience of electronic storage and often mention how they can have multiple books, magazines, and newspapers archived or bookmarked for reading online. More than one student mentioned how much lighter her backpack was now that she has an electronic bookshelf on her tablet.

Most important to note, several students in this study who had reported they had become blasé about reading for recreation said that reading electronically had jump-started reading for fun at home and school. Several boys and girls admitted their parents limit their tablet time at home each school night. One boy brightened when this discussion began and shared, “My parents doubled my iPad use if I am reading a book half of the time.”

Despite the electronic features available for marking text, the main complaint students had for reading electronically was revisiting text to find evidence for an answer during teacher-led reading groups. You can swipe back through the pages to reread, but it isn’t the same as turning pages.

Another issue was the effects of changing the font. Changing the font size reflows the text, so students couldn’t report a universal page number to answer the teacher’s question so everyone in the group could reread too. Other children chimed in at this point and all agreed the page-turning “tap” is too sensitive, and may turn multiple pages if the reader’s finger lingers too long on the edge of the tablet.



She’s a plugged reader; he’s unplugged.

## Unplugged Reading: Pros and Cons

An interesting phenomenon happened when this study reached the third phase—the choice between the two formats. Thirty-six out of ninety-four, more than a third of the students, chose a traditional book.<sup>10</sup> Their reasons were mostly aesthetic. They liked holding a real book. One little girl lovingly hugged a book she had been reading, saying, “Sometimes when I just love a good story, I want to hold it. You can’t hug an iPad.”

Unable to articulate why, most just said things like “I just like how real books feel when you hold them.” Unwittingly, they informed the main assertion of this study: reading electronically is not better or worse, just different. They could sense it, and it didn’t feel right to some.

Students who preferred unplugged reading had complaints about the tablet navigation as well. Their main concern with reading on tablets was a feeling of distraction. One boy said, “Well, I try to stick to my reading, but then I start wondering if there is a good show I can watch on Netflix or maybe I can beat my highest score on one of my games, or I get a text that pops up. And then I have lost my place because I started thinking about other stuff I usually do on my iPad instead of reading.” Even at this age, he could voice a concern about his ability to attend to text and comprehend while reading electronically.

## Same, but Different

Classroom teachers, parents, and librarians everywhere are aware of the enthusiasm for electronic devices and are working to shift their thinking. The children of today’s generation are no longer mini-versions of ourselves.<sup>11</sup> What we know from our past literacy development may no longer be relevant. So we continue to find ways to teach and inspire literacy with digital devices.

In this study, the teachers enthusiastically worked alongside the students to support their reading. Unsolicited, one of the teachers commented, “When it is time to come to the reading group with me, they get so excited because they know I will have them reading on the iPads.”

Others used the tablets for their required silent reading time, reading more for social studies

units, and even finding directions for projects in their maker-space.

Once e-book reading was introduced in the classroom, both students and teachers were motivated to find ways to integrate reading in this format. But they have not turned completely away from traditional books.<sup>12</sup>

Hopefully, children’s libraries will always have traditional book collections available, especially for young emergent readers. I predict one day, the education world will look back and know learning to read must begin with traditional books; once a reader is independent, e-books can be introduced.

As one perceptive fourth grader said, “Real books helped me learn to read, but now it’s fun to jump out of them and read on an iPad.”

And what of those who just do not like reading electronically? A choice should be allowed. We need our traditional book shelves for both kinds of readers. ☺

## References

1. Marc Prensky, *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010).
2. Hakan Dundar and Akcayir Murat, "Tablet vs. Paper: The Effect on Learners' Reading Performance," *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education* 4, no. 3 (2012): 441.
3. Bob Lenz, "Will the iPad and other Similar Technology Revolutionize Learning?" Edutopia, June 9, 2010, <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/ipad-new-technology-revolutionize-learning>.
4. Adina Shamir and Ofra Korat, "The Educational Electronic Book as a Tool for Supporting Children's Emergent Literacy," in *Multimedia and Literacy Development: Improving Achievement for Young Learners*, edited by Adriana G. Bus and Susan B. Neuman, 168–81 (New York: Routledge, 2009).
5. Marc Prensky, "Listen to the Natives," *Educational Leadership* 63, no. 4 (2005): 8–13.
6. Nicola Yelland, Caja Gilbert, and Nicole Turner, "iPlay, iLearn, iGrow: Using iPads in a Play-Based Kindergarten Program," *Every Child* 20, no. 3 (2014): 14–15.
7. Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1978), 139.
8. Claudia McVicker, "Plugged and Unplugged Reading: eBooks vs. eBooks" (paper presented, Literacy Association of Ireland Conference, Dublin, October 2017).
9. Prensky, "Listen to the Natives."
10. Claudia McVicker, "Plugged and Unplugged Reading: Young Readers' Preferences Matter" (unpublished paper, Department of Education, Faculty of William Jewell College of Liberty, Missouri, 2017).
11. Prensky, "Listen to the Natives."
12. Cynthia L. Gregory, "But I Want a Real Book: An Investigation of Undergraduates' Usage and Attitudes Toward Electronic Books," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (2008): 266–73.



From left, Josephine Lee, Erika Lee, and her son, Billy, at the Gene Yang event. Erika and Josephine are both Asian-American Studies professors at the University of Minnesota.



St. Kate's MLIS students with Gene Luen Yang. Both photos by Katherine Warde, owner of Addendum Books.

On July 12, 2017, the St. Catherine's University Master of Library and Information Science Program hosted National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, MacArthur Genius, and award-winning graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang, where he spoke about Asian Americans in graphic novels.