

eBooks and School Libraries

By Heath Graham

The publishing industry is undergoing a series of massive changes with the growth of online retailers, followed closely by the explosion of ebook sales. Naturally, these changes in how books are produced and consumed are having flow-on effects, including in the world of education and school libraries.

Do ebooks have a place in schools? Recent research by the [Joan Ganz Cooney Centre](#) in the US suggests that while 'enhanced ebooks' — books that feature animations and interactive elements — encourage children's engagement, they also lead to a decreased recall of story details. There was, however, little difference between 'basic' text-only ebooks and printed books, so it seems that basic text may be essentially 'platform agnostic'. The addition of features such as highlighting, searching and text-to-speech make texts much more accessible to students with learning difficulties.

In the realm of nonfiction, the multimedia capabilities of ebooks, from keyword searching to media embedding, have the potential to completely revolutionise textbooks. Being able to include, for example, animations of planetary orbits, audio

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of a concert, or video footage of a stage performance, promise to change our basic idea of what a 'textbook' is. For now, many of these features require an app as opposed to an ebook, but new standards such as the currently planned epub format revision will see this change in the near future. The other advantage with e-textbooks is their lightness. Rather than lugging around kilograms of textbooks, students could potentially need just one reader device.

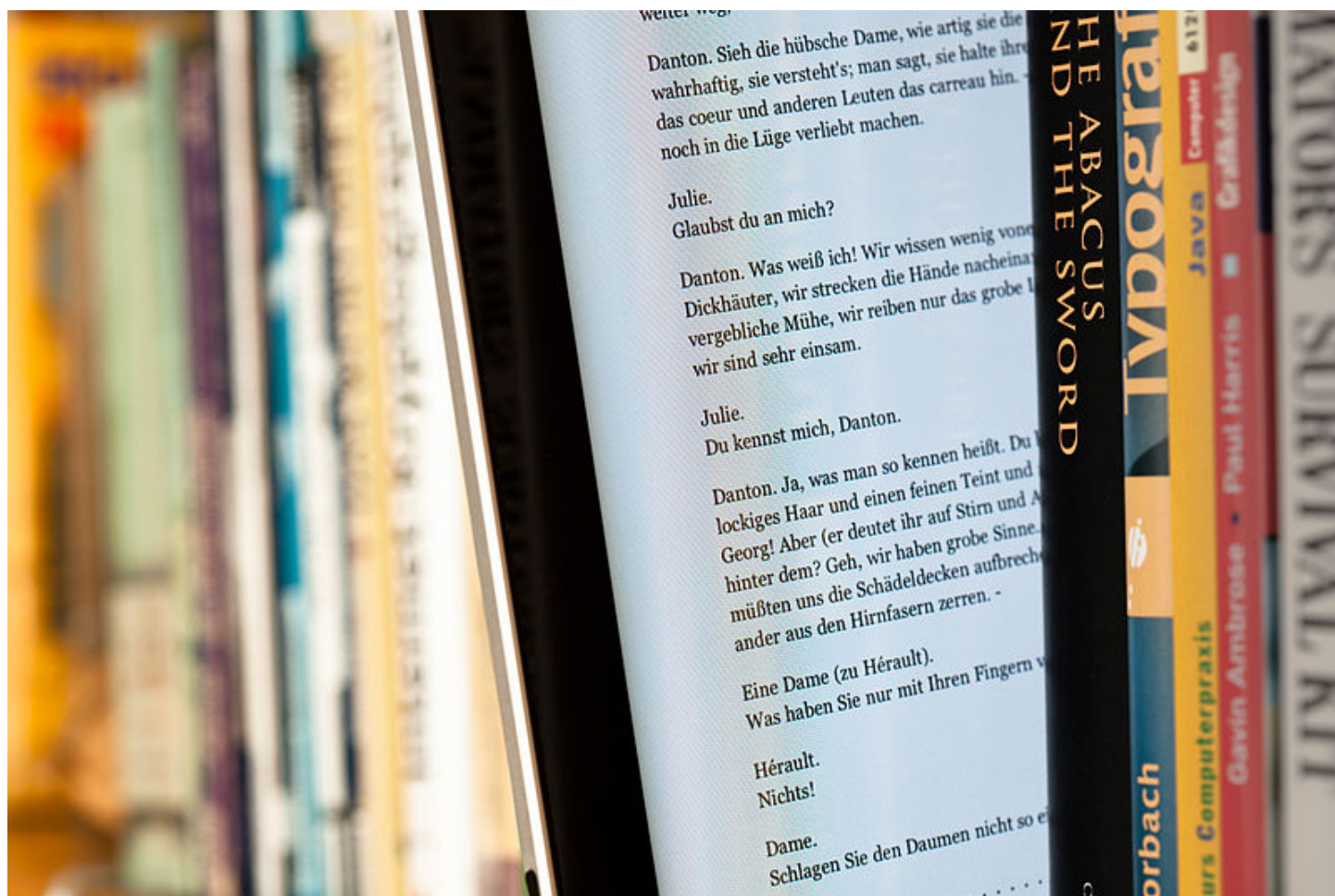
Given that ebooks seem to have a place in schools, the next question is how best to supply them for students. Issues that need to be resolved include platform, access and availability.

Platform

What devices will be used to read ebooks? Although most ebook formats can be read on a PC or laptop, handheld devices are the more usual method. A school will need to decide between supplying devices or a BYOD (bring your own device) approach.

Many schools have already purchased a small set of ebook readers (such as kobo and kindle ereaders) that are pre-loaded with a selection of books and can be loaned to students. An example of this system is being run by teacher librarian Sue Ann Barber at Eltham College of Education. These devices have proved popular with students. Beyond their novelty value, they can contain many books in a small space, and they allow for

enhancements such as search and text to speech. Other schools allow students to download ebooks to their own devices.



E-textbooks, often featuring more advanced interactive content, will usually require a more advanced platform than an ebook reader to access their features, and more and more schools are purchasing 'class sets' of iPads for this purpose. E-textbooks are also driving the growing trend toward iPads over laptops as the standard classroom device.

Access

How are ebooks being made available to students? Cathy Hainstock of Vermont Secondary College explains her school's process. They have a selection of non-fiction ebooks bought outright in PDF format. These are stored locally on the school's Moodle page. Cathy has found these ebooks are underutilised, but a recent update to Destiny, the school's Library management System, allows these PDFs to be accessed directly from the catalogue. Her school has chosen not to buy any fiction ebooks due to concerns about licensing arrangements and ongoing availability.

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Overdrive is the main ebook distribution platform used in Australian schools at the moment, and students can download ebooks directly to their devices from its

catalogue. Overdrive's schools product currently offers over 100,000 ebooks and 30,000 audiobooks.

Availability

As with public libraries, availability can be a complex issue. Overdrive offers a subscription system at an ongoing cost to school libraries. However, publishers may change their access conditions through the system, for example, HarperCollins' decision to limit a title to 26 downloads. Depending on license conditions, a school might need to license a book multiple times to loan it to more than one student at a time. In the end, these titles are not owned outright by the library, an issue that all libraries, school and public, are still grappling with.

The most important factor to consider is cost. All of these innovations require an investment, and in an era of shrinking budgets and disappearing teacher librarians, many schools are taking a wait-and-see approach out of necessity as much as choice. Most State Education departments will offer advice, but have no official policy or dedicated support, leaving decisions on ebooks to individual schools. This has led to a very wide range of ebook experiences at different schools, from state of the art to non-existent, driven to a large extent by the commitment of staff and the available resources.

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