Running Head: ELECTRONIC LITERATURE AND ITS PLACE IN EDUCATION

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*What is Electronic Literature?*

E-books and e-book readers are an up and coming trend when it comes to how the general public purchases and reads books. E-books are digitized versions of books, along with other types of publications, which have been formatted for e-book readers, machines that display e-books. A lot of the terms that come to mind when this subject is brought up are Amazon, Kindle, and Sony. Electronic literature, meaning digitized texts, is something that has been manipulated so that the companies Amazon and Sony have the mainstream power over them. I compare this to online music stores and how even though there is an array of them, Itunes seems to hold all the cards in that market.

Electronic literature is mostly delivered through an e-book reader, which is a small electronic device that weighs less than a cup of coffee, is as wide as half a sheet of paper, is as thick as a pencil and fits well into a small carrying case (Pappas, 2009, p 48). The most popular e-book readers are the Amazon Kindle and the Sony Book Reader, whom at the moment rely on different file types in order to make e-books accessible on those devices (Pappas, 2009, p 49). The major difference between these e-book readers is the way they access purchases made through their stores. The Kindle uses its wireless Internet access in order to allow a user to purchase e-books through its store whereas the Sony Book Reader requires one to purchase the book via a PC in sync it through a USB cable (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, Tobin, 2009). In terms of features there is one device that is usually not associated in the modern thought process of e-book readers, but has had the consideration of many, a computer. The computer is something that after being tested in comparison to the previously stated e-book readers, has won the preference of some users (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, Tobin, 2009).

There are many factors that are pushing educational institutions to pursue the implementation of these devices, as well as similar ones, which include convenience, costs, environmental friendliness, and the overall movement to digitized information. From elementary schools to higher education and libraries, all of these institutions have begun a movement through the testing of these devices and formats in order to compare and contrast electronic literature and traditional printed texts.

*Electronic literature in educational settings*

Electronic literature has found its way into various educational settings and levels based on what educators feel could be their advantages. However, because this movement is still fairly new, more long-term research is still required in order to get a broader scope on the more concrete effects of these devices. The Kindle seems to be the most popular e-book tool being implemented in elementary education because of its non-threatening appearance and the features it possesses that might attract students who would normally not want to read, especially not for pleasure (Pappas, 2009, p 49). The Kindle has a speaker function that would allow young readers to follow along with a book much to the effect that books on tape used to have about two generations ago (Pappas, 2009, p 49).

Another educational movement that has been heavily considered with electronic literature is its use in libraries. The Kindle, a tool that has been found useful for previewing and reviewing books for school librarians, does not have its place in libraries just yet due to conflicts that would arise with Amazon’s digital bookstore and its ability to work with a library card system (Pappas, 2009, p 49). However, digitized publications are very popular in libraries as the demands for electronic texts have risen, especially because a desktop can be used to access such publications (Kaser, 2009). Like the other levels of education, libraries are looking into electronic literature because of the physical space e-books take up and the cost benefits they possess (Kaser, 2009).

Finally, an electronic literature movement that has taken place in education that has had a large impact on how this technology is perceived has taken place in higher education. Northwest Missouri State University had one of the most notable movements towards electronic literature in trying to gather the perspectives of students towards this technology after a trial period. Two phases were used in Northwest’s trial, one in which they would use a popular e-book reader and one in which they would use a laptop computer. The Northwest students found that the e-book use was more convenient in that their physical load of carrying books had largely lightened (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, Tobin, 2009) and that it was easier on their budgets, but in the end the benefits that this technology were supposed to bring were outweighed by the cons (Young, 2009).

Many educational institutions have become the leaders in the electronic literature movement. However, like any pilot program that is implemented, negatives and positives come up as well as the potential for growth in the area. While many institutions like Northwest want to shift into the technological approach of texts, there are elements that make all institutions think twice about this approach to literature.

*Points to ponder in electronic literature*

The pilot program launched by Northwest brought to light some of the challenges e-books still have to overcome. The first being that the student preference for an e-book reader was a laptop because if they ever had any questions about what they were reading, a PC has more features that would allow them to look up information than any e-book reader currently has (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, Tobin, 2009). Another factor that bothered Northwest students was that of getting everyone on the same page, literally, as e-book pages were not numbered the same way as the actual printed book (Young, 2009). Lastly, another major factor that has affected the e-book reader movement towards higher education was the fact that the major devices are in black and white, which hinders the learning of subjects like science and medicine because they are taught with a large use of illustrations (Young, 2009). These components have played a major role in why the e-book reader movement has not been as prevalent as some pioneers may have hoped, as about half of the students at Northwest still prefer their printed textbooks as opposed to digitized versions (Rickman, Von Holzen, Klute, Tobin, 2009).

One place where all users agree that e-book readers win the battle against printed texts is its environmental friendliness. A main instructor preference towards a movement in electronic texts is that of raising recycling awareness by not depleting natural resources as well as polluting the environment with toxins (Malone, 2008). One Northwest faculty member stated that “she would now choose e-books over printed ones, not because she thought they were better but because they save trees (Young, 2009).” The Green Press Initiative, an organization focused on implementing these types of movements has stated that about 20 million trees were used to print US books a year, which brings to light the good that these technologies can posses in the long run (Malone, 2008). One ultimate goal of e-book readers is to have students make the environmentally conscious decision when purchasing their books (Malone, 2008).

*Final Thoughts*

In theory the use of e-books and e-book readers in general seems ideal in that they reduce book costs, are better for the environment, provide better portability and various styles are available in the market. However, this technology still has a long way to go before one sees its full use in education. The observations that Northwest made along with what other educational levels have noticed are why all but a small amount of students use e-books instead of traditional printed versions (Nelson, 2008). Compatibility is what I gathered as the main concern, not only in knowing which machines can read what file types, but in the perception of all those affected in this movement. If students cannot follow what a professor is doing due to pagination issues, or if a pre-med student cannot gather the full experience of an illustration because a Kindle cannot display a picture in rich color, then both the student and the instructor end up losing. In these cases students may find buying a printed text to be the obvious choice as they may not prefer the digitized version if they anticipate that their instructors have a liking for the printed version of that book (Nelson, 2008). The print edition in this case eliminates these compatibility issues, but that’s not to say they cannot be fixed as these devices evolve. Amazon, Sony, and now the newer Nook device by Barnes & Noble, have become strong in personal use, but when it comes to its place in educational literature implementation it is best said that it is not until these companies create versions that work with institutional practices, that their use will be embraced on campuses nationwide (Young, 2009).

The prevalence of electronic literature will remain its strongest in library use through journal articles, but beyond that it will take some time. Currently, in terms of digital course materials, “more than 90 percent of that content is being accessed or delivered through campus resources, such as the library (Nelson, 2008).” Digital journal articles have found their way to stay in education, but that is mostly due to the fact that practically any computer can access them. Until there is a more universal way to adapt education to e-books and e-readers, electronic literature will have to keep its strength in this area.

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