

## Unlock Literacy with iPads

In the spring of 2010, I placed an iPad on my desk, and my students immediately gathered around and asked if they could play with it. The district's director of instructional technology gave me the iPad to experiment with and consider how we might integrate it into the English curriculum at Euclid High School in Euclid, Ohio, USA.

Because my students were so interested in the iPad that day, I decided I'd show them how it worked. Mostly, though, they showed me. That wasn't surprising. Most of my students were familiar with the iPad, and many of them either owned an iPod or used one regularly. It was obvious my students were engaged; now all I had to do was find content and teaching methods that would work cohesively with the iPad.

In October 2010, the district provided me with a class set of 24 iPads on a cart, and I was charged with tracking data over the school year and sharing what I learned about the iPads. While there had been a lot of talk about how such a device might shape education, few English language arts teachers—let alone educators in general—had conducted their own research into the iPad's impact on student achievement.

Somehow I knew my students would be engaged by the iPads, and I suspected the devices could potentially transform learning and teaching in my classroom. The majority of my students receive free or reduced-price lunches, and some of their families have been disenfranchised from school for several generations. Many students come to my sophomore English class two grade levels below where they should be in reading and writing.

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### Choosing Apps

Finding the right apps was a process of trial and error. Knowing that students would be the best judges of the apps, I watched while they tried them out. I noticed that students settled quickly into using apps that engaged them in ways that traditional classroom activities could not. With other apps, it seemed that students would rather surf the web. Some apps would adjust to a student's ability, and others allowed users to select increasingly difficult levels. It became clear that, in many cases, the iPad apps allowed for differentiated instruction. I made careful note of this and adjusted the app selection.

Here are some of the apps that worked well with my students:

**iBooks.** With access to Apple's eReader app, students experienced reading some of the classic works of literature in ways they'd never imagined, by clicking on unfamiliar words to determine meaning and context. Getting students to read outside of class for homework is often a chore, and I began to wonder what would happen if my struggling readers could take the iPads home. At this point, the devices were to remain at school. One drawback of using a relatively new format was that some classics, such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, were not available in either EPUB or eReader format. This was a source of frustration for me and my students.

**Vocabulary-building apps.** Students had access to apps, such as WordFlick and

Words With Friends. WordFlick is a solo game that provides the player with a number of letter tiles, similar to those found in Scrabble. The player must create words using only the provided tiles, with more points awarded for multisyllabic words and words that use unusual letters, such as Q, X, and Z.

I would post high scores at the front of the room to motivate students. Some students began to challenge me in head-to-head bouts. This led me to Words With Friends, a similar app that allows users to play against each other. Students quickly became enthralled with this app, challenging each other to games and playing multiple games at once. They quickly discovered new words simply by trying letter combinations. When a classmate was skeptical, they researched the words in a dictionary app.

Without encouragement from me, students looked for opportunities to use vocabulary words introduced in class, knowing these words would likely give them a higher score. I used these apps during enrichment times, such as when a student had finished an assignment or journal entry early.

**Storytelling apps.** Struggling readers often have trouble visualizing the literature they're reading, so I found apps to help. Puppet Pals and ToonTastic appeal to the finger puppeteer, whereas Storyrobe and Strip Design engage students in digital storytelling. As we read the August Wilson drama *The Piano Lesson*, students would work in groups to retell a critical scene using one of these tools.

By Jim Harmon

**Authoring apps.** Two apps, Keynote and Pages, were great for creating content. In Keynote, students created their own hypertext poetry, linking lines in a poem to web-based citations that provided explanations for examples of literary terminology that appeared in the poem.

Journal entries became a far more engaging process for both me and the students. When students struggle with reading and writing, they often forget materials for journal writing. They wrote their journal entries on the iPads, and I made the following observations:

- Students completed journal entries more quickly than when writing with pen and paper.
- Both the quality and the quantity of their writing improved.
- More students who had struggled to complete entries using pen and paper were now finishing them.

On top of this, I no longer had to crate home boxes of journals and tether myself to the dining room table every month to assess student writing. I could now check their writing assignments on my smartphone or iPad. And I could provide students with more timely feedback on their writing, which in turn helped them make adjustments in their own writing sooner.

### Improved Learning

The English curriculum at our school follows a simple curriculum map featuring common formative assessments and common term exams. After looking at the data, I found that students

with iPad access were more likely to pass the reading portion of the 2011 Ohio Graduation Test (85% compared to 79% of students with no iPad access in school). In addition, students with iPad access were more likely to pass the writing portion of the 2011 Ohio Graduation Test (92% compared to 84% without access). I've heard teachers say that technology doesn't prepare students for a paper-based test. I believe that assumption is incorrect.

Students with iPad access improved their reading and writing ability on average a full grade level above their peers, based on the Measures of Academic Progress benchmark test given to students in the spring of 2011. This was wonderful to witness as a teacher, but I also wanted to know what my students thought about their progress.

In a survey I had sophomores take in the spring of 2011, I asked students to rate their own ability as a reader and writer. The students in classes with no iPad access rated themselves as more confident readers and writers. My students, however, were more critical of their own reading and writing ability. They rated themselves lower than their peers. I believe the iPads gave my students more accurate and critical feedback on their literacy skills and provided a more accurate perception of their own reading and writing abilities. The students without access had an inflated sense of their own literacy skills.

When I asked students how they regarded the iPad as a learning tool, the comments were positive. Marcus, one of my students, said the "iPad holds my attention more than a regular computer."

Another student, Chris, said the iPad "keeps me motivated and interested. I don't zone out like I used to."

Rakia believes her writing became stronger "because I can get instant feedback on my writing when I use the iPad."

Matt summed up what many teachers already know: "A lot of students don't like actually sitting down and reading a textbook, but on an iPad, you can learn your lessons differently."

### iPads Are More Than a Novelty

At the end of the school year, I determined the iPads met my needs as a teacher and met my students' needs as learners.

The simplicity of the iPad, the uniqueness of its user interface, and the familiarity of design all point to one thing: excitement for learning. No other pedagogical tool or technique in my experience engages students in a way that makes learning fun and leaves students feeling like they are in control of their own learning. Often students may have an initial interest in something "different," but the iPad seems an open door to a world of self-directed learning that has significant possibilities.

It is my hope that more teachers will begin integrating tablet computers into their classrooms so that we can get a more complete picture of the impact of technology on education. I also imagine a day when all of my students come to class with their own iPads, ready to engage in learning in ways that I can only dream about.

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