Newcastle City Learning: Using e-readers with adult literacy learners

Summary

As part of a JISC RSC Northern’s action research project investigating the effectiveness of e-book readers for adult literacy, Newcastle City Learning received six Kindle e-readers to trial with three identified groups of Skills for Life (SfL) learners. The learners readily and enthusiastically engaged with the technology and the learners’ experience was very positive and enjoyable.

One of the e-Readers in the SfL group

About Newcastle City Learning

Newcastle City Learning delivers a wide range of adult education programmes from a number of centres across the city. It offers formal qualifications as well as Functional Skills and Family Learning courses. Newcastle City Learning’s SfL team is based at the Heaton Centre.

The challenge

Newcastle City Learning was enthusiastic to participate in an action research project led by RSC Northern. The aim of the project was to investigate the effectiveness of e-book readers
for SfL learners and explore the potential benefits and drawbacks of this type of device. The project also included dyslexic learners and learners with visual impairment.

**The activity**

RSC Northern provided Newcastle City Learning with six Kindles (non-3G) which were pre-loaded with 16 ‘Quick Reads’ e-books, selected by the SfL team. The staff involved were SfL co-ordinator Anna Brown and two tutors: Judith Rust and Cathy Stark.

Kindle e-readers were chosen as some staff were already familiar with this type of e-reader. Also Kindles have proven reliability and a wide choice of titles available.

An action research project brief was produced by RSC Northern and timescales agreed with the SfL team.

The Kindles were purchased from Amazon by RSC Northern and registered to one account. After the acquisition of the ebooks, the Kindles were de-registered before they were issued to the learners, to prevent unauthorised purchases. The SfL team received training and support from RSC Northern e-Learning Adviser Paul Miller.

The learners were introduced to the Kindles at the start of the Autumn term. None of the learners were familiar with e-reader devices, but were happy to be part of the project and keen to start using them.

**The outcomes**

Feedback was gathered from learners and tutors in a variety of ways including:

- Group discussions
- Tutor's notes and observations

Progress reports were provided at regular project review meetings and video was used to capture learner interaction.

Learners reported the following advantages and disadvantages of using a Kindle:

- One unexpected advantage is the **privacy factor**. The learners felt more comfortable travelling on public transport reading from a Kindle because nobody can see what you are reading.

  One learner commented: “You could be learning to read or reading War and Peace. If you’re learning to read you could disguise it with a Kindle”.

- Another advantage is **portability**. The device is small and light and you don’t have to carry lots of books with you - hundreds of titles can be stored on a Kindle.

  **Clarity of print**; the option of increasing the font size and spacing helped many readers, especially those with dyslexia or visual impairment.

  One learner said: “I like the fact that the Kindle screen has an anti-glare element to it and you can change the font size”.

- The **variable speed voice function** assisted learners to read along, as well as providing help with the pronunciation of more difficult words.
• The on-demand dictionary was also a popular feature. This was particularly useful for some learners whose first language was not English.

• The Kindles have also worked well for learners who suffer from physical disabilities such as arthritis; They reported that because the Kindle is thin and light, it is easier to hold than a book, easier to turn pages and you can’t lose your place in the book.

• A number of learners felt that they were more motivated to read from a Kindle because the technology was 'cool'. Learners were eager to take the Kindles home and share them with their families. One learner commented that her 11 – year old son was much keener to read using the Kindle than a book.

Some drawbacks of the Kindles were identified:

• The Kindle’s synthesised speech has a US accent and a lack of intonation or emotion. It would have been better if the speech was more natural in a neutral accent.

• Kindles are expensive to purchase for personal ownership.

• It would be useful if the screen background colour could be changed for learners with dyslexia.

• It would be better if the Kindle could have a touch screen; the buttons are rather small and fiddly.

• Downloading content from a 'corporate account' means that the kindles have to be re-registered then de-registered for more purchases.
The impact

Overall, the learners’ experience was very positive and enjoyable. The Kindles have encouraged some learners to read more and have helped to develop their skills with digital technology. The Kindles are in constant use in the SfL provision at Newcastle City Learning and a significant number of learners stated that, when offered the choice, they preferred to read from the Kindles.

Cathy Stark, SfL tutor, said:

“Kindles have encouraged learners to give peer support in the classroom, with the more confident and technology literate students being able to support the less confident”.

“Kindles have been extremely well received by the dyslexic readers. Out of the seven learners, three have actually gone on and bought their own e-reader. The project has been very positive and encouraged people to read more than they would have done without the Kindle”.

The lessons learned

The SfL team would have liked more books for the Adult Core Curriculum/Functional Skills to be available for Kindles. They contacted various publishers about this issue and as a result, Readwell Road publishers agreed to a trial with Newcastle City Learning to make their series of structured reading books for adult learners available in ebook format. Generally, ebooks are cheaper to buy than physical paper books.

Newcastle City Learning will continue using Kindles and they are currently exploring funding options to extend their use to more groups of learners.

Useful links

- Jisc RSC Northern
- Newcastle City Learning
- e-Reader video

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