

Why we shouldn't simply replace textbooks with electronic books

A leading school in Sydney, Australia, recently decided to swap digital textbooks for the hard copy version, citing better learner comprehension and reduced distraction as reasons for doing so. Australia's Reddam House primary and junior high school classes have used e-textbooks on iPads, but the consistent feedback from the students was that they preferred pages to screens, resulting in the swap. The school will be phasing out iPads in favour of laptop learning to supplement with textbooks.



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“Where the school went wrong was to abolish the book in favour of digital textbooks, rather than introduce electronic means to complement learning via textbooks,” says Steve Thobela, Novus Print: Executive - South (part of the Novus Holdings Group). “In education it simply doesn’t work to throw out the baby with the bathwater and replace books with digital textbooks.”

Thobela is well recognised as a printing industry heavyweight, who joined Novus Holdings earlier this year from heading up industry body Printing SA.

Enhance, not replace

Thobela says that this recent Australian example serves as an important lesson for South Africa. Earlier this year President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that government will digitise the public school education system over the next six years by providing every learner in SA with digital workbooks and textbooks on a tablet device.

“We are for the use of technology to aid education. If it is used correctly, it can greatly enhance a learner’s education and ability to become a valuable member of society,” says Thobela. “However, to prepare our children for a future that includes the fourth industrial revolution, we must first get the basics right before introducing technology to the mix, such as making sure that learners can comprehend what they are learning. How can you, for example, introduce learners to a computer if they can’t comprehend what they are reading?”

Statistics released by the University of Pretoria show that eight out of 10 Grade 4 pupils still cannot read at an appropriate level, which has a ripple effect on the pupil’s ability to perform academically. Furthermore, South Africa was placed last out of 50 countries in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) which included nearly 320,000 children globally.

Research vs revision

“If you are researching only, then any electronic device such as a laptop is an advantage. But to prepare for exams, the textbook, or workbook, is required. It is very, very difficult to only rely on an electronic device to help you study for an exam. This is because learning and the retention of information is known to improve with the use of books.”

Research undertaken by Two Sides, an initiative that promotes the sustainability of paper, found that learners who used paper-based learning felt that they performed better than when reading from a screen. It also found that once the distraction of the internet was added, learners’ work suffered. Neuroscience further finds that the brain retains information better when it interacts with the written word.

“To make digital learning work, we have to first be able to crawl before we can run. Crawling means improving our country’s literacy rates. Once learners understand what they are reading, then we can introduce technology as a complementary tool to physical books. We should guard against knee-jerk reactions that are not supported by thorough research, and are ultimately not in our learners’ best interests,” concludes Thobela.

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