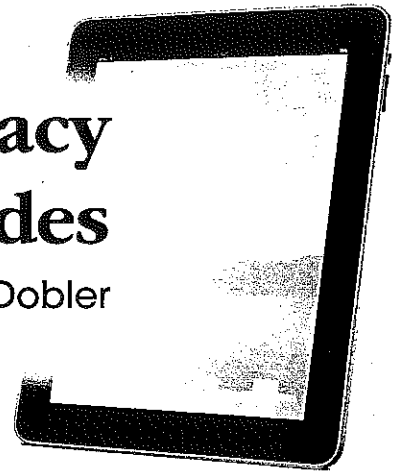


Using iPads to Promote Literacy in the Primary Grades

by Elizabeth Dobler



Jessica Asbury's first grade classroom in Piper East Elementary in Kansas City, Kansas, has the quiet hum of activity as children move between individual, partner, and small group work. Jessica can be seen working with a guided reading group, having a writing conference, or giving an informal fluency assessment while also monitoring children as they work on differentiated tasks around the classroom. As Jessica talks to individuals or the whole group, she uses the words of active learning, such as productivity, stamina, goals, thought-processes, challenge, independent, and choice. The structure, environment, and tone of the classroom all reflect Jessica's beliefs about learning which include providing children with opportunities to set their own goals, make responsible choices, and take ownership of their learning:

Amidst this productive learning environment, an observant visitor would notice three small electronic devices being shared among the children. iPads have become an integral component in Jessica Asbury's classroom. Jessica uses these interactive devices as tools for promoting best practices in teaching and learning and cultivating the attitudes and beliefs which she values in her classroom.

iPads, first introduced in early 2010, appear to be taking education by storm, with elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and colleges purchasing these tablet computers for use with students. But what exactly is all the buzz about? After all, isn't an iPad merely a mobile source for the Internet, much like a laptop? And what is an "app" anyway? What are the advantages of using iPads in the classroom? For technology to be integrated into instruction, the tool must let us do something better—more efficiently, more effectively—than we can without the technology. For Jessica, this means using the iPad as a tool to promote differentiation, collaboration, and ownership of learning among her first graders.

Shoulder-to-Shoulder Learning

By their very nature, iPads are interactive. Fingers are used to tap, swipe, drag, pinch, and stretch icons or text. A visitor to Mrs. Asbury's first grade classroom will frequently see two

children sitting close on the floor or doubled up in the rocking chair, heads huddled together to see the screen, both children interacting with the device by touch. Through this partnership, children are working together to solve problems and discuss solutions.

Children have "the opportunity to share their thinking with others," says Jessica as she discusses the shift in roles brought about from the use of iPads in her classroom. Children need the opportunity to talk through their thought processes or seek support or assistance from another person when Jessica is working with a small group or conferencing with a child. When Jessica is not able to listen or provide direct support, the children come to rely on each other. The iPad facilitates bringing children together. The interactive applications encourage thinking and discussion as children practice the skills identified by the district's implementation of the Common Core Standards.



Jessica Asbury, First Grade Teacher



Shoulder to Shoulder Learning

Differentiated Learning Made Easier

One way Jessica uses the iPad is to promote differentiation during literacy center time. While she meets with a guided reading group, students are working at various literacy centers, which include writing, reading to self or a partner, completing morning work, and using the iPad with a partner to practice a certain set of skills each day. To prepare for the iPad use, Jessica creates three folders in the iPad, entitled red, blue, and green. Each folder contains educational apps chosen by Jessica to meet the different levels of learning needs for children in the red, blue, and green groups.

An app is a software application which lets the user of a smartphone or mobile device (in this case, an iPad) do or create something. As children rotate through the literacy centers, pairs of children have a turn with the three iPads. In addition to providing differentiated folders of apps, Jessica has also organized apps into categories.

Advantages of iPads

- Easy to use
- Promote interaction between the user and the device
- Organize and store manipulatives like game pieces, puppets, flash cards
- Provide quick access to activities
- Invite collaboration
- Support differentiated instruction

Each day the children are expected to work with apps from a certain category: fluency on Monday, word work on Tuesday, spelling on Wednesday, and word games on Thursday. Fridays are reserved for a free day where children can promote other avenues of thinking by choosing an app for making pottery, playing chess, publishing stories, or a host of other activities. Periodically Jessica reviews new educational apps and makes adjustments to the leveled folders based on the interests and learning needs of her students.

In addition to the three guided reading groups, the first graders are also organized into five leveled groups for spelling instruction and practice. On Wednesdays, the iPads are used for spelling practice during literacy centers. Students practice their own spelling list through various apps which are used to spell words by using Morse code, sign language, electronic glitter letters, a digital white board or a dozen other ways which each student can choose based on individual interests.

For iPad use at center time, Jessica encourages higher level students to challenge themselves by working with apps which require knowledge beyond the grade level expectations. At the same time, children who still need to meet grade level standards can develop their skills by using apps for this level of practice. Jessica explains her instructional decisions regarding the iPad in this way, "In every classroom you are going to have a wide range of abilities. So if you don't allow for these levels within center time, it's not as productive. My students know their colored group and know where they are supposed to work."

Choice, Motivation, and Ownership

The beauty of iPads, according to Jessica, is their simplicity. Children can access activities for developing literacy skills with a swipe and tap of the finger; no waiting for hard drives to boot up or becoming frustrated with down servers. Manipulatives for a myriad of literacy games and activities are stored on the iPad, saving time and energy for the teacher, who must manage all of those flash cards and game pieces when using traditional activities. The ease of



Additional Resources Online

Go to *Reading Today* Online at www.reading.org/readingtoday to consult additional resources made available in connection with this article including:

- A video of Jessica Asbury's class in action
- A PowerPoint demonstrating 62 classroom uses of iPads



Taking Turns



Doing Spelling

use with the iPad promotes independence among learners and encourages the development of a sense of ownership or an attitude of "I can do it myself. I can be in charge of my learning."

A key to building this independence in this first grade classroom is Jessica's value of choice in learning. Jessica has established a tone in her classroom where children feel empowered to make decisions about their learning because they have the opportunity to make choices within the structure she provides. As Jessica explains, "The kids feel like they are in charge of where their day leads them. Through the goal setting and through the choice, they have so many options of how they want to grow every single day, and it's based on their own initiative. The iPad is a tool to promote this choice and motivation."

A Tool for Promoting Learning

As the reading groups and centers draw to a close for the morning, Jessica has an informal class meeting where the children are encouraged to self-reflect on their learning during literacy centers and set a goal for the next day. As a group, they discuss the choices children made during the literacy block that morning and the specific activities which encouraged their thinking and practice. One child shares a problem he and a partner had with writing spelling words in the glitter app, and how they worked together to solve the problem. Even with all the bells and whistles of cool apps and an interactive screen, an iPad serves merely as a tool to facilitate instruction and learning. But its motivating power and versatility have caused educators to stand up and take notice.

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