Unlocking Literacy with iPads

A teacher research project by Jim Harmon
Euclid City Schools, Ohio

Is there really an app for that?

Searching for a solution

The iPad has been the focus of much excitement in the educational world, leading some to insist the device is a death knell for textbook companies. This mobile device, featuring Apple's iOS, has become as ubiquitous as the popular iPod, a similar, yet smaller device. Many youths, seemingly regardless of

income, race, or other demographic indicators, are aware of these devices, and either own these devices or have used one on a regular device. While much has been hypothesized about how such a device might impact education, few teachers have conducted their own research into the iOS's impact on student achievement. This paper hopes to examine the
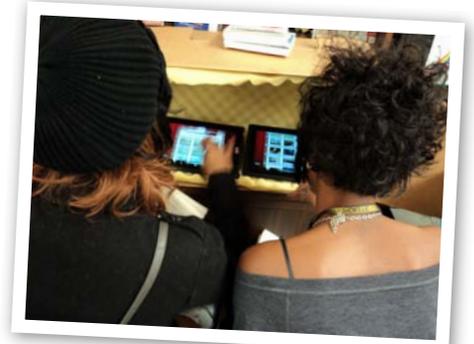

iPad's impact on a tenth grade English class's achievement.

At Euclid High School, where the majority of students receive a free or reduced lunch, and many of their families have been disenfranchised from school for multiple generations, traditional literacy tends to be undervalued. Euclid, an inner ring suburb of Cleveland, is a community
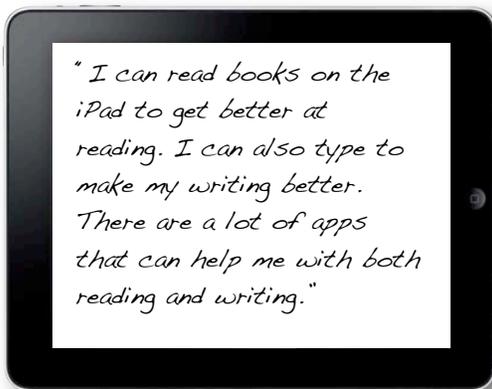
Engaging students in learning

in transition. While the majority of students at Euclid High School are African-American, as recently as twenty years ago, the majority were white. It would seem that most students, regardless of race, struggle to find reasons for the curriculum to matter in their lives, and their teachers struggle to engage them.

All students in Ohio must pass a standardized test as a requirement for graduation, and two of these tests are considered the responsibility of the English teacher: reading and writing. While some view state mandated testing as a n assessment of one's overall literacy, these state tests are a gateway to one of the most important preliminary life tickets: the high school diploma. Following the model of TPCK, the author of this article was seeking to identify a technological tool that would engage his students in literacy instruction in ways that would lead them to achieve at higher levels in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and writing applications.

" I can read books on the iPad to get better at reading. I can also type to make my writing better. There are a lot of apps that can help me with both reading and writing."

Mobile learning, personal learning

For students often described as "at risk" (this author prefers the term "underserved"), the tool would need to maximize instructional time and would ideally make reading and writing more palatable for students, while meeting the diverse developmental needs of the learners. After consulting with the district Instructional Technology Coordinator, the author was provided with a single iPad to test for viability. When the author placed the iPad on his desk at the beginning of subsequent class periods, he was swamped by students who simply wanted to touch it.

The iPad featured the same ubiquitous iOS as the iPods students carry in their pockets and backpacks. This meant that the author would have to invest very little instructional time using the iPad for learning. With access to iBooks, students could experience reading some of the classic works of literature in the school's curriculum in ways they'd never imagined, thanks to context clicking of unfamiliar words within the app.

Finally, the apps available for the iPad allowed for differentiation of instruction. Students had access to vocabulary-intensive apps, such as WordFlick and Words with Friends, access to tools for visualizing literature, such as Puppet Pals and ToonTastic, tools for story retelling, such as Storyrobe and Strip Design, and tools for authoring content such as Keynote and Pages.

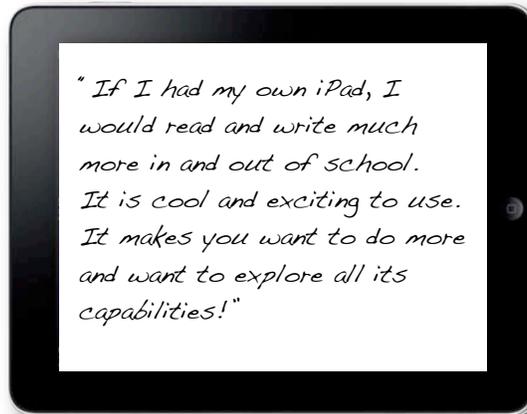**The impact of tablet computing**

The author was provided with a set of 24 iPads which remained in the

Apps as game changer

classroom during the course of the year. Students were unable to take the iPads out of the classroom, however, they became a regular staple of teaching and learning. Students wrote their journal entries on the class Moodle, accessed on the iPads. They took common formative assessments using the iPads. Students collaborated on the retelling of works of drama with apps and then presented them to their peers. They competed with each other and their teacher for the highest vocabulary score using apps like WordFlick.   Students focused on meaningful work in ways this author has truly only imagined in his sixteen year career as a teacher. Even moreso, because students journaled on their iPads, the insturctor avoided a semi-quarterly ritual of carting home boxes of spiral notebooks for assessment, and was empowered to   give more frequent and timely feedback on student writing.

The simplicity of the iPad, the uniqueness of its user interface, the familiarity of design all pointed to one thing: excitement for learning. No other pedagogical tool or technique used in the author's career engaged students in a way that made learning fun and left students feeling like they were in control of their own learning. More often than not, students may have an

" If I had my own iPad, I would read and write much more in and out of school. It is cool and exciting to use. It makes you want to do more and want to explore all its capabilities!"

initial interest in something "different", just for novelty's sake, but the iPad seemed an open door to a world of self-directed learning that has significant possibility.

Measures of Academic Progress

Legend: Students w/ iPads; Students w/o iPads

RIT Score — Reading RIT score, Language Usage RIT score

MAP Test

Ohio Graduation Test Results

Legend: Students w/ iPads; Students w/o iPads

Percent — Reading, Writing

OGT Test