

iPad Programs Could Lead to a Bright Future for Schools

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Abstract

Although many teachers across the U.S. are creating motivating projects requiring the use of the iPad to improve student learning, using this device to promote academic improvement is only one of the reasons this technological resource can be beneficial. When instructors use iPads effectively, they save print cost, promote motivation, and develop 21st century skills. The iPad's touchscreen can also be particularly helpful for implementing technology with elementary students who tend to be hands-on learners. While many educators are raving about the progress various districts are making with this tool, critics argue that too much money is being spent, which should be invested on more important areas in K-12 education than technology. This article discusses how various school districts are using iPads to promote learning and motivation and mentions some concerns educators have about the skyrocketing use of this resource in K-12 settings.

Introduction

Since the release of the iPad in March 2010, more and more schools have started programs providing students with this technological tool, and this trend is expected to continue (Norris & Soloway, 2012). Although many teachers across the U.S. are

creating motivating projects requiring the use of this device to improve student learning, using the iPad to promote academic improvement is only one of the reasons this technological resource can be beneficial. The iPad can also save a school a considerable amount of paper. For example, one school district in Austin, Texas, saved over \$30,000 in print costs when teachers posted their assignments electronically (Foote, 2012a). Furthermore, as a result of using electronic tools instead of hard copies of books, many students have less to carry back and forth between school and home. Learners also benefit by completing assignments on their tablets because this process helps them develop 21st century skills (Jones, 2011). And there are even more ways iPads can benefit pupils.

While many educators are raving about the progress various districts are making with this tool, critics argue that too much money is being spent which should be invested on more important areas in K-12 education than technology (Hu, 2011). Skeptics also mention that when teachers start using a new technology, students often experience an initial zeal that later fades away.

In this article, I discuss how various school districts are using iPads to promote learning and motivation, and I also mention some concerns educators have about the skyrocketing use of this resource in K-12 settings. Understanding the reasons many educators are excited about this new device and what their critics say will help school leaders decide whether an iPad program can transform their school or district positively.

Motivation and the iPad

Using iPads often motivates students and even teachers, and this enthusiasm promotes many positive outcomes including a willingness to help others. For example, after administrators implemented an iPad program in Austin, Texas, librarian Carolyn Foote observed more students collaborate with their peers and their teachers. Not only did more students help each other, but faculty, library staff, and technology personnel constantly interacted with each other about topics involving the new program (Foote, 2012a).

Within the Chicago Public Schools, one technology coordinator commented that a similar scenario occurred in that district as well and said that using iPads promoted collaboration among teachers and students (Mulholland, 2011). After testing the iPad at over 20 of its schools with good results, administrators in the Chicago Public School system may soon be using the iPad with all their students. The Technology Education Director, John Connolly, commented that he was impressed with the iPad and saw students use it every day for all subjects (Mulholland, 2011).

Sydnye Cohen also experienced the excitement of using iPads in a school setting. At Brookfield High School, where she works in Connecticut as a library media specialist, she was able to motivate 250 ninth graders to be excited about using the iPad for the first time as well as draw from different districts that were interested in visiting this school to find out more about their technology project (Cohen, 2012). Cohen describes how students access motivating content on their iPad such as

films that make academic subjects come to life.

The iPad seems to engage students when teachers assign them work that requires learners to use well-designed apps, and because this tool captures pupils' interests so well, many educators feel the iPad can be valuable for helping students learn. A variety of factors attract students to this tool. For young students in the lower elementary grades, the iPad's visual and hands-on design seems to fit these learners perfectly. Elementary students in the Chicago schools experimenting with iPads were using apps and the touchscreen with ease, and in one class, second-graders learned spelling and pronunciation with an alphabet app to help them learn different words. (Mulholland, 2011)

Furthermore, the iPad seems to work at a fast speed, and one instructor found that receiving immediate feedback helps students stay engaged (Foote, 2010). Using this resource in school also helps students stay connected to the digital world they live in. Many students today use technology to share aspects of their social lives, and when teachers take advantage of the technology skills students bring with them to school and instruct them to do assignments using new technologies like the iPad, a sense of excitement frequently fills the classroom.

Learning with the iPad

Using the iPad allowed students to participate in projects that help them learn in new ways and develop their sense of creativity. When working on multimodal storytelling projects, for example, students

used the picture and video features in a creative way. Additionally, many apps support students' understanding of academic disciplines. For instance, at Westlake High School's iPad pilot initiative in Austin, Texas, students in the Environmental Science class use an app called Leaf-Snap to document plants, and the AP Human Geography students use the app Zapd to create blogs on natural hazards (Foote, 2012b). Some teachers at this school even use the iPad for a "flipped classroom" — a way of teaching utilizing teacher-created videos students view at home to allow a teacher more time to interact with learners in class instead of lecture.

In the Chicago Public Schools, pupils at all levels are using the iPad. High school students are creating roller coasters using the Coaster Physics app to understand motion and energy, and first graders are developing their word processing skills by using apps called Pages, Simplenote, and smartNote (Mulholland, 2011). High school students in this district keep their Internet research skills sharp by exploring various websites on their iPads to answer questions.

The iPad can also be valuable for teaching reading. Many e-book apps available for the iPad enable children to make sense of a book with sound, video, and narration. These multimodal e-books usually contain text that is highlighted when read. Children oftentimes find these resources more motivating than print books, and research shows that children make academic gains when using well-designed e-books because the added features help them make more sense of a book (Shamir & Baruch, 2012; Shamir & Shlafer, 2011). Examples of websites with free multimodal e-books for children are listed below.

Name of Website	URL
Reading is Fundamental	http://www.rif.org/
Between the Lions	http://pbskids.org/lions/stories/
Magic Keys Books	http://www.magickeys.com/books/
StoryPlace	http://www.storyplace.org/
Story Time for Me	http://storytimeforme.com/series/

Guernsey (2011) describes how one literacy coach observed how powerful e-books on a touch screen can be. The literacy coach, Pam Oviatt, first saw several boys enjoying a narrated e-book of Doreen Cronin's *Diary of a Worm*. Then, after she announced to her students that she had received a hard copy, the children burst with excitement and hurried to look at the book to connect what they had seen on their touchscreen with the words in the hard copy.

Critics of the iPad

Although the iPad is creating excitement and more administrators are enthusiastic about the possibility of implementing iPad programs, critics argue that much of the enthusiasm over technological resources like the iPad is nothing more than hype. Hu (2011) reports that some notable scholars in education, such as Larry Cuban, a professor emeritus of education at Stanford University, believe that educators should spend more money training teachers rather than investing in technology. Other experts such as Norris and Soloway (2012) remind educators that whenever expectations towards a tech tool skyrocket, disappointment follows. They explain that in 2007, the technological community was devastated when some schools stopped using laptops after students failed to make academic progress. Murray and Olcese (2012) contend that proponents of technology often suggest that 21st century tools will transform teaching and learning,

but the reality of how technology is implemented oftentimes fails to meet the expected effect.

Deciding which side is right can be difficult. Teaching students to learn from technological resources and developing their 21st century skills is a worthy goal, but if schools invest millions of dollars in technology and teachers are poorly trained to use it, the end result could be regrettable. Norris and Soloway (2012) argue that if school administrators provide iPads to students without providing ongoing professional development, the appropriate software, and a curriculum that exploits the software, students will fail to make academic gains. They also point out that these were the reasons that caused some technology programs in previous years to backfire.

Conclusion

K-12 schools are implementing the iPad at a faster rate than any other technology without signs of a slow down (Norris & Soloway, 2012). This technological resource can undoubtedly be helpful for K-12 school districts for various reasons. When instructors use iPads effectively, they save print cost, promote motivation, support understanding of academic content, and develop 21st century skills. The iPad's touchscreen can be particularly helpful for implementing technology with elementary students who tend to be hands-on learners. These younger pupils can also improve in literacy from e-books they view on an iPad. For older students, doing schoolwork on their iPad can be equally motivating, and they can use well-designed apps that match their school curriculum.

Although enthusiasm about the iPad has risen rapidly, educators need to be aware that in previous years, technology programs have, at times, been disappointing, and this may also occur with many new iPad programs that are surging across the U.S. In order to avoid a letdown, experts in technology such as Cathleen Norris and Elliot Soloway recommend for school administrators to provide sufficient support for teachers to ensure that the new iPad programs will succeed. Providing teachers with the appropriate resources they need to teach well with this technology will likely lead to a bright future for K-12 schools.

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