



PAPER OR SCREEN

IT'S A MATTER OF CLOSE READING

Reading on paper versus screen is a popular conversational topic, whether as expressions of enthusiasm about carrying tens of novels in a handbag or concerns about the effects of digital distractions on children's reading habits. For librarians and teachers who are wondering about the best approach to the use of reading devices, a number of recent studies offer a confirmation of some trends as well as some conflicting evidence. As often is the case, the devil is in detail.

In the article entitled *Reading and Learning From Screens Versus Print: A Study in Changing Habits (Part 1)* published in *New Library World*, Stoop, Kreutzer and Kircz reported the results of their research into reading and learning from print and electronic media. Study participants were university students and city council members, in Amsterdam. In a study of sustained reading from a screen by city council members, iPad1 and Irex1000D were used as ereaders.

The reported advantages of an ereader were portability, prompt document delivery at the time of council meetings, and the ease of carrying a large number of documents and looking back at older versions. Browsing, annotation and referencing, however, were all more easily done by using paper versions of documents. The authors found the printed version was still better for learning and processing complex texts, while ereaders were better for quick searching, communication and navigation.

Another part of their research concerned students' use of a textbook. The authors compared reading from print, and reading a PDF file on laptop computers and on Irex 1000D. Since PDF files on laptops did not offer the advantage of an electronic document, the overall experience was negative. Initial enthusiasm of the IREX users quickly diminished, as they tried all the functions, found them disappointing and quickly lost interest. Almost none of the study participants in this group finished by studying from their ereader.

Major disadvantages were that the ereader was too slow to move easily between sections of the textbook, and it felt more like a scroll than a book. Finally, students who used the print version, (initially thought to be a 'boring' group) had no complaints, and spent the most time studying. The authors suggested that the study offered important lessons for the design and structuring of the text for use in paper and digital forms.

A Comparison of Reading Comprehension Across Paper, Computer Screens, and Tablets: Does Tablet Familiarity Matter? by Guang Chen and colleagues in the *Journal of Computers and Education* investigated the reading comprehension of college students in China, who read from paper, tablet and computer. The authors found that literal comprehension, also called shallow comprehension, was significantly better when students read hard copies. The difference was less significant for deep comprehension. Tablet familiarity was an important distinguishing factor among screen users. The group with a high level of tablet familiarity performed better than the low familiarity group on deep level comprehension tasks.

Studies like these can potentially help librarians to make informed choices, but it is important to pay close attention to study details and compare results of several relevant studies. 'What works better?' is a highly contextual question, so the answer depends on the details. It is also worth keeping in mind that most studies investigate known reading habits and very few focus on emerging behaviours in interactions with the digital technology.

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FROM OUR COLLECTION:

Stoop, Judith, Paulien Kreutzer, and Joost Kircz. 2013. *Reading and Learning From Screens Versus Print: A Study in Changing Habits*. *New Library World* 114 (7/8):284-300.

Available from ALIA ProQuest database.

Chen, Guang, Wei Cheng, Ting-Wen Chang, Xiaoxia Zheng, and Ronghuai Huang. 2014. *A Comparison of Reading Comprehension Across Paper, Computer Screens, and Tablets: Does Tablet Familiarity Matter?* *Journal of Computers in Education* 1 (2-3):213-225. Available at bit.ly/1CSXssK.