

Explor-eBook: Explore, Read, Interact, Assess

By James Anderson

21st Century Skills and Technology in the Classroom

Technology has become a necessity in classrooms, as both a demand from students and a push from educational communities around the world to prepare students with twenty-first century skills. These are skills that are necessary for students to be competitive and function as part of a global community (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2007).

To meet these needs, classrooms are becoming more interactive with new hardware such as tablets, interactive whiteboards, laptops, media servers, and document cameras, that connect students to the curriculum and allow them to communicate and collaborate inside and outside the walls of the classroom. Using this technology is second nature for students born into this digital age. And as these and new devices become more prevalent, new teaching strategies and curriculum must be employed to make learning engaging and meaningful for students.

With a call for more challenge-based, active learning in the classroom, a growing number of teachers strive to create student-centered learning environments where students are more invested in their learning. By integrating technology that students already use into the curriculum, students are empowered to decide how they interact with a subject. This model allows a connection to form between the curriculum and students' own lives, which in turn may inspire higher levels of engagement and rigor to the curriculum (Johnson, Adams, and Cummins 2012)

The aforementioned learning environment can benefit how a student interacts with a piece of text and ultimately affect how students internalize what they are reading. In the case of digital books, or ebooks, students can access their books using tablets, smartphones, computers, or ereaders. Students can go through the book in a linear fashion as they would a print book, or in a non-linear way—looking through page thumbnails until they find a page of interest. They have choice and the ability to explore the text at their own pace and in their own way.

Bean (2000) points out that students often hold negative attitudes about reading because of dull textbooks or being forced to read. *Explor-eBook* was created with this in mind. By using technology with which students are familiar to present text in an engaging format, *Explor-eBook* helps to facilitate a student-centered environment and promote challenge-based active learning.

What Is an eBook?

An ebook is a book that is produced in a digital format and can be viewed on various stationary and mobile devices, including ereaders, computers, tablets, and smartphones. A traditional ebook in its simplest form is a static digital document. That is to say that the document itself is merely a digital representation of its print counterpart and offers similar if not the same reader applications.

The aforementioned platforms on which an ebook can be displayed usually offer some customization of text and basic tools which the reader can use with the text. Readers may be able to change the font size of the text and the color of the text and page. They may be able to leave notes attached to a text, highlight text, look up the meaning of words, and bookmark pages. In the classroom, this functionality allows students to interact with the text in a more convenient yet similar way to which they interact with print text (*i.e.*, when reading a print book a student can leave notes in the margins, highlight text, and bookmark, as well as use a print dictionary).

The Next Level: Explor-eBook Books

Explor-eBook improves upon the traditional ebook model. These digital resources give students the opportunity to experience the text in a way that is overall different from a printed book or traditional static ebook. They are content-rich digital books that contain auditory and visual elements that can support differentiated instruction and content knowledge development, improve literacy and fluency skills, and develop 21st Century skills, such as media and information literacy—the ability to adapt to new technology and thrive in an information-abundant environment.

Explor-eBook books provide a dynamic vehicle through which to explore, visualize, and understand the rich information and concepts of a text in an engaging and tactile way that will help students internalize what they are reading. Each digital book includes some of the same tools found in a traditional ebook when viewed on an ereader, including the ability to highlight text, leave notes, and bookmark pages of interest, but also move reading to the next level by incorporating other engaging interactivity for students to explore.

Engaging students and immersing them in a text is a primary goal of *ExploreBook*. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) note, “engaged reading is strategic and conceptual as well as motivated and intentional.” By making the reading process come alive with interactive tools and features, *Explor-eBook* books motivate students to read in a way that is both intentional and authentic.

Explor-eBook additionally supports improved fluency and comprehension of text. The record function present in each digital book in this series allows students to record their own voices reading the text, allowing teachers, or students themselves, to “observe, examine, reflect on, and respond to [the] reader’s actual real time reading.” (Goodman 1996; Rasinski 2003) All of these tools provide a setting in which students can not only access rich content, but also practice their reading skills and improve their comprehension, making *Explor-eBook* a simple choice for curriculum implementation in comparison to traditional print and ebook formats.

Explor-eBooks Features:

- ◆ Learning tools and features have been added to Explor-eBook books to enrich both teaching and learning of the concepts presented in each book.
- ◆ Glossary pop-ups offer immediate vocabulary support.
- ◆ Photos, illustrations, and videos, provide comprehensive visual support for students.
- ◆ Video clips engage students, extend the reading experience, and scaffold student learning when introducing new vocabulary.
- ◆ Text-to-audio highlight functionality (differentiated for grade-level developmental appropriateness) supports fluency and multiple modalities of learning, connecting what students hear to what they see in the text, by aiding struggling readers’ decoding and comprehension skills.
- ◆ Professional audio recordings promote fluency, vocabulary development, and proper pronunciation and intonation.
- ◆ Record functionality allows the reader to record the book in his or her own voice.
- ◆ Interactive word work and comprehension activities, found at the back of each book, focus on key concepts and learning goals that enrich the reading experience through reflection and concrete connections between students’ background knowledge and new information presented in the text, and in turn serves as a means for authentic assessments for the teacher.
- ◆ Writing, drawing, erasing, and highlighting tools offer opportunities for students to take ownership of their reading and put their thoughts directly on the pages of the book. This can facilitate building key comprehension skills, such as identifying the main idea, understanding the author’s purpose, and summarizing the text.
- ◆ Zoom functionality allows students to look at images and text more closely.

Building Content and Literacy Skills

In our increasingly global and information-rich society, students need to be eager to learn, seek answers, and have the necessary skills to navigate the various informational texts they will come across in school, the workplace, and everyday life. According to Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis in their book *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* (2000, chap. 10), “Interesting authentic nonfiction fuels kids’ curiosity, enticing them to read more, dig deeper, and search for answers to compelling questions.” *Explor-eBook* provides students the opportunity to hone these skills in a digital environment while practicing twenty first century skills.

In their article featured in *The Reading Teacher* (2000), Ivey and Broaddus suggest that familiarity with nonfiction text will add to students’ depth of content-area knowledge and understanding. The importance of teaching reading skills specifically for understanding texts is evident (Anderson et al. 1985). *Explor-eBook* offers teachers an engaging and motivating environment, in which to generate student interest in reading and offers students an engaging and fun atmosphere, in which to enjoy the road to reading mastery.

Research has consistently found a deep connection between vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and academic success (Baumann and Kame’enui 2002). *Explor-eBook* facilitates this connection by providing key vocabulary terms and definitions accessible directly in the text for immediate clarification. These digital books can be used to introduce students to text features such as the cover, title page, or glossary. They also allow students to make connections between written and spoken words. Students can clearly hear the difference between statement and exclamatory sentences. They can hear the natural rhythm associated with reading and can use it as a model for their own pronunciation and timing when orally reading. *Explor-eBook* books can build students’ understanding of comprehension skills such as summarizing the text, understanding the main idea, and stating the author’s purpose. They also can be easily adapted and integrated across the curriculum.

The *Put Reading First* document clearly defines reading comprehension as “the reason for reading,” but students must move beyond word recognition and decoding to understand the text being read (Armbruster and Osborn 2001). In other words, a lack of decoding skills can hinder a student’s ability to comprehend what he or she is reading. Students need to be fluent readers to better comprehend the information being read. That does not necessarily mean being able to read faster. Wolf (2005) points out that comprehension is the main goal of rapid reading, not rapid reading. The goal is for students to read at a pace that allows them to focus on the meaning of the words, rather than the words themselves. The visual and auditory resources provided in *ExploreBook* books facilitate discovery of the concepts provided, at a normal reading pace, while setting a purpose for reading to build students’ comprehension.

Explor-eBook empowers students to build upon and improve their comprehension skills by clarifying meaning through key vocabulary, providing fluency practice, and helping students make connections between the text and the world around them. The student activities provided in each *Explor-eBook* book creates an opportunity for students to read the text multiple times for different purposes, which Rasinski (2003) says supports the rapid development of fluency in young children. And as noted by Kuhn and Stahl (2000), fluency is seen as directly affecting reading comprehension.

The student activities in each *Explor-eBook* book further provide a connection between reading and writing and can help activate students' prior knowledge to foster comprehension. Pinnell (1988) suggests that there is ample evidence that the processes of reading and writing are inseparable and that educators should examine pedagogy in light of these interrelationships. *Explor-eBook* was created in the spirit of these interrelationships across the curriculum and an ever-changing pedagogy.

Meeting the Needs of All Students

Explor-eBook acts as a visual anchor to focus instruction and provide a large canvas for a shared literacy experience that meets the needs of all learners Mardis *et. al.* (2010) point out that through flexibility and multimedia, digital textbooks offer support for students with various learning needs. For example, students with vision impairments or physical conditions that prevent them from holding a book or turning pages may find a digital book easier to use and read. Additionally digital [books] can help students that are easily distracted stay active and focused allowing them to grasp concepts with greater success. *Explor-eBook* series provides the flexibility to meet the needs of all learners and to keep students actively engaged.

Dorn and Soffos (2005) explain that the “ultimate goal of teaching is the development of self-regulated learner[s]—...student[s] with the capacity to guide and monitor [their] own learning on different tasks for different purposes.” *ExploreBook* gives students the tools they need to navigate the books on their own. The easy-to-use interactive features, such as videos and reading and writing activities, increase rigor and allow students to make real-world connections to the text and extend their own knowledge.

Reading in a student-centered environment gives students the chance to work towards further independence and confidence in their reading capabilities (Pearson and Gallagher 1983). A student-centered environment is beneficial to above-grade-level learners that seek to extend their knowledge and be more independent with their learning. The interactive activities and videos found in each *Explor-eBook* book are a good starting point for further thought and exploration of the concepts provided.

Learning to read can be a complicated process, that develops over a long period of time. Quatroche (1999) points out that most children learn to read and continue to grow and master this process; however there are a group of children for whom reading is a struggle. Through vocabulary-development opportunities and audio and visual features, *Explor-eBook* books offer struggling students the support they need to continue growing their reading skills towards mastery.

Explor-eBook also provides support for English language learners through the use of text features, video clips, interactive activities, text-to-audio highlighting, and audio recording. Students benefit from the approaches contained in these digital books that reinforce the relationships between experience, talk, and print. While reading, English language learners get to experience the rich multimedia that is found throughout the text, which provides deeper and meaningful insight into the subject matter. These extensions make the text come alive and help students overcome the language barrier.

Final Thoughts

Explor-eBook was created to immerse students in the reading process and information-rich environment, to develop students' literacy, and to help ensure reading mastery, all with appropriate text complexity in mind. This series is presented on a mobile platform that allows students to interact with and manipulate the text to meet their specific learning needs with technology to which they are already familiar and comfortable. Furthermore, students can be actively engaged in a challenged-based learning environment wherever they are; thus, expanding students' fluency with 21st century skills.

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