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Sixth Media in Transition International Conference
MIT, 24-26 April 2009

Kindling *Great Expectations*

Abstract

Over a year and a half ago the launching of Amazon's e-book reader, the Kindle, promised to change the way Americans read books and newspapers for business or for pleasure. Although the Kindle may not change the way people read in a short time, it will change publishing in fundamental ways. If this currently expensive device, which is available only in the USA so far, fulfils its grand design to revolutionize print, then what changes might the Kindle bring to the academy and to higher education? It is my belief that may become an indispensable tool for an educator at a time when convincing students to read required texts proves increasingly challenging.

As a literature teacher at a NEASC-accredited, Liberal Arts college based in Athens, Greece, I welcome every digital novelty which makes me a more effective communicator and every technological development which inspires students to navigate the academic world more efficiently. In my presentation I would like to discuss from my perspective as an educator advantages (as well as drawbacks) that the use of an e-reader like Kindle may have on learning practices in higher education. I would argue that the Kindle can become essential to undergraduate education as a device which stores textbooks and learning material while allowing highlighting and annotating.

For the current generations of college students who are used to reading text online and on a screen, an e-reader can be initially a versatile accessory which stores textbooks but also the latest bestsellers, encouraging young people to view the act of reading as entertaining, creative as well as useful. Although the Norton Anthologies have yet to be Kindled, hardly any of the literary texts I teach, are not already or will not soon be available, making it easier for students to read and study—not to mention bring their books to class. The Kindle's current storage capability of more than 1,500 non-illustrated books far exceeds the needs of a typical 5-course semester and it is feather light at 289 grams compared to the average textbook. Academic publishers will soon realize that the Kindle may prove to be the most appropriate format for specialized titles that enjoy only a limited run as well as for classics such as Dickens's Great Expectations, typically required reading for English majors anywhere. Depending on the edition digitized into a Kindle-friendly format, Great Expectations currently costs nothing (in Plain Text) or up to \$4 for a critical edition; moreover, for \$1 sixteen Dickens novels can download into the Kindle in less than a minute. As aesthetically improved and digitally enhanced versions of Kindle appear in the near future and more titles become available, this device will change some forms of reading and will greatly assist the task of the educator in the college classroom.

Kindling Great Expectations: The Use of e-Readers in the College Classroom

**The following summary discussion
of the use of e-reader devices in education
is work in progress.**

At an international literary festival in Hong Kong in March 2009 celebrated author Margaret Atwood commented on the benefits to the environment technologies like Amazon's Kindle and other electronic readers would bring, noting that they "would save a few trees" (International Herald Tribune 9 Apr. 2009:13). Perhaps it seems odd at a time of economic crisis when the publishing industry is suffering, traditional bookstores are closing down, and few people can afford pricey gadgets, like the Kindle, for an author not to lament the effects of the crisis on print media but to celebrate alternative forms of reading. Or is Atwood only noting the obvious?

When Amazon launched the Kindle in November 2007, few people doubted the business instincts or the enormity of ambition of Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos in wishing to introduce an electronic equivalent to a print medium, and one which promises to improve on a 500-year old product. Launched in February 2009, the latest Kindle, namely 2.0, is pencil-thin and holds over 1,500 books but it is still very expensive as well as only available in the US market. The high pricing of the product, its advantages and its limitations, the economic policy of Amazon, all these are issues that will continue to be debated in blogs and online forums for some time. I have no vested interest in the world's largest online store and I am not advocating the apparent merits of the Kindle unaware of its detriments. For those of us who live outside the USA, the video demonstration of the Kindle on the Amazon website is enough to assure us that sophisticated and ever improving e-

readers will indeed change the way in which we read for pleasure.

Reading for pleasure represents only a small amount of the reading that most of us do, however. For educators books constitute the tools of the trade. When I see the Kindle advertised, I do not see a person casually enjoying a sunny day at the beach, holding an e-reader; I see the students in my Victorian literature class who have to read Great Expectations over Spring break! The possible uses of the Kindle in the classroom began to suggest to me that electronic reading devices may affect not only the way future generations read but also the way they study. For years now major publishing firms of educational textbooks have created specialized websites and provided other audiovisual material, such as CD-ROMs and DVDs, to assist students with learning. As a literature teacher at a NEASC-accredited, Liberal Arts college based in Athens, Greece, I welcome every digital novelty which makes me a more effective communicator and I embrace every technological development which inspires students to navigate the academic world more efficiently. In my presentation I would like to discuss from my perspective as an educator the effects that the use of an e-reader like Kindle may have on learning practices in higher education.

As an associate professor of English at Deree College, I enter the classroom equipped with print and electronic media. The success of my educational mission depends upon the use of multiple tools and requires a learner-centered environment. For the current generations of college students who are used to reading text online and on a screen, an e-reader can be initially a versatile accessory which stores textbooks but also the latest bestsellers, encouraging young people to view the act of reading as entertaining, creative as well as useful. I would argue that the Kindle can become essential to undergraduate education as a device which stores textbooks and learning material but also enables students to read critically since the device allows highlighting and annotating texts.

The most obvious practical advantage of using the Kindle in higher education relates to its size and weight. The Kindle's current storage capability of more than 1,500 non-illustrated books far exceeds the needs of a typical 5-course semester and it is feather light at 289 grams compared to the average textbook. The type of discipline-specific printed matter I use in the

classroom daily, namely rhetoric textbooks and literature anthologies, are heavy to transport to the American College of Greece's non-residential campus so my commuting students often express fatigue not only over the amount of reading they have to do but also in relation to the size of their texts! A device which can store all the texts they will need to read and carry with them to class is a most practical gadget. Equipped with a Kindle, college students will not feel burdened anymore and may begin to define a great book with criteria unrelated to its size.

Although the Norton Anthologies of English and American Literature have yet to be Kindled, hardly any of the literary texts I teach, are not already or will not soon be available, making it easier for students to read and study—and bring their books to class. For students (and their parents) used to spending hundreds of dollars (or Euros) every year buying academic textbooks the price of the Kindle may prove by comparison to be attractive as the retail price of an e-book is sufficiently lower than the price of a print edition. Academic publishers will soon realize that the Kindle may prove to be the most appropriate format for specialized titles that enjoy only a limited run as well as for successful and frequently revised textbooks. The updated edition of an e-book can easily replace a previous e-version as copies of the old edition do not need to be recalled. Instructors may also consider changing textbooks if opting for another textbook involves less effort and they know that another e-title is readily available. In addition, for a variety of disciplines in the Humanities which depend upon classic texts available in the public domain, such as Dickens's Great Expectations, the knowledge that the majority of e-titles currently available are free may mean that some academic areas may be ready to adopt electronic readers sooner than others. Depending on the edition digitized into a Kindle-friendly format, Great Expectations, for instance, costs nothing (in Plain Text) or up to \$4 for a critical edition; moreover, for \$16 sixteen Dickens novels can download into the Kindle in less than a minute. Therefore, the Kindle may prove invaluable from a practical and economic perspective (not to mention the environmental benefits to which Atwood referred at the beginning).

More significantly, though, the Kindle will affect education at its core as it will have long term effects on studying habits as well as the pedagogy of

teaching. If college professors (and each of their students) can have immediate access to hundreds of texts in the classroom, courses will be designed and taught in ways which will encourage versatility, flexibility, and interdisciplinary approaches. Student notes as well as lecture notes, exercises, glossaries, practice tests, any kind of learning material will be converted and uploaded on the Kindle of the future (which will have enhanced memory capacity as the current 2 GB will prove inadequate even for the Kindle's main application, book storage). During class time as well as study time students will be able to retrieve learning material stored from previous semesters relating to prerequisite courses so students will easily learn to view the Kindle as their main college notebook, as indispensable as their laptops. Discipline-specific courses will become even more effective as the choice of educational material will improve once top universities and academic publishers collaborate more closely to serve the needs of this specialized audience. Academic textbooks may become part of subscription databases to be downloaded onto the Kindle through college libraries. These random predictions, as yet undigested and untested, are some of the possible short-term applications the Kindle may bring to the college classroom.

As the technology of e-readers develops and more experts consider the possibilities, more suggestions will be voiced. The potential for educational applications of the Kindle has just begun to be explored: *EduKindle*, a new blog maintained by Will DeLamater, seeks to "enhance the Kindle experience" for educators and administrators <<http://www.edukindle.com/>>. I did not research this or other sites thoroughly but it is obvious that some American educators are already investigating pedagogical applications of e-readers. More such discussions, online but more significantly on college campuses, will ensure that applications in higher education multiply in the months to come. As aesthetically improved and digitally enhanced versions of the Kindle appear in the near future and more titles become available, I am positive that this device will affect some forms of studying and will greatly assist the task of the educator in the college classroom.