

## **Evolution to Revolution: How Technology is Changing the Way We Learn, Communicate and Live**

### **The Kindle Reader Prompts an Opportunity to Further Innovate**

Dr. Cindy Larson – August 2009

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#### ***eBooks, Digital Learning Assets, and Digital Readers***

A few years ago eBooks were conceptually a great idea, but soon many consumers (aka e-Readers), especially those in higher education were turned-off because of their “clunkiness” on the computer. They were typically a PDF that was hardly searchable and didn’t link out or offer anything in the way of interactivity. As use and interest waned based on clunkiness, it forced many, particularly those in the publishing industry, to rethink their models of delivering eBooks (i.e., beyond a PDF), selling the eBooks (price-point for a soft copy versus a hard copy and the used book market) and the usability of the eBook for the consumer (how do they want it electronically and what is a reasonable price-point). The tremendous growth of online learning and the increased interest in digital readers (i.e., Sony Reader, The Kindle) really created renewed interest in the last year. So, it was/is time to rethink the strategy around eBooks, but also the nomenclature. Are eBooks supposed to be primarily black and white words and some random images? Or, should they be digital assets that offer full color, ability to tab notes in the text, look up words instantly you don’t know, interact with the information (i.e., audio, visual, kinesthetic learning object), link-out to the internet to other relevant data, etc? The answer is quickly becoming very clear.

Fast-forward to summer 2009, eBooks/digital learning assets (DLAs) are hot topics primarily because the new version of the Amazon Kindle came out in July. This has prompted cutting edge online educators to contemplate how to further implement eBooks and best design a plan to incorporate digital readers into the learning experience.

Today’s eBooks/DLAs are looking much different than even 12 months ago. The roadmap for eBooks/DLAs in tandem with the digital reader world is fairly exciting as we truly start to get our hands around the possibilities of marrying content and technology into the learning experience. In addition, understanding what consumers are looking for beyond today’s digital reader offers an opportunity to combine multiple functions into once device and innovate like never before. However, there is always a starting point and for those pioneering eBooks/DLAs and digital readers the opportunity to align and innovate is now!

A typical starting point, for those in higher education, is looking at online programs that have sustainability (i.e., MBAs, Liberal Studies), identifying faculty who are most supportive of online and exploring new media that supports learning, and identifying publishers that offer the most robust eBook content (well beyond the hardly searchable PDF) that are willing to work to a model most suitable for a given institution's mission and vision. Most typically start with a beta launch. The other component that is critical is committing while piloting to still offering access to a "hard copy" texts if the student wishes to have one available. This typically eases the "slower-to-adopt" who want to keep buying their very pricey \$150-plus textbook.

eBooks can take two approaches – an electronic text available in an online course or in a student's online library, and/or content that can be sliced and diced and placed in various places within an online course (i.e., where it's relevant and needed). The later approach can also help content be more tied to key learning outcomes and support accreditation reporting. The other aspect is that learning in this manner is less about the "textbook" and more how content both from textbooks and other sources can come together to create a great learning experience (text, video, audio, learning objects, etc). As research notes, there's a movement for higher education institutions to move to eBook adoption, mostly because online learning has driven this demand and "obvious" natural integration. The key is balance between offer traditional hard copy text and ebooks as consumers (in this case, student) transition and adjust.

### ***The Kindle***

Based on a popular press literature review, the Kindle has been noted to be the best e-book reader to appear on the market. Compared to the iPod, it could be the tipping point in a whole new way to access a popular medium. The Kindle offers two things people often look for: convenience and wireless access. This means anytime you want to read a new book, you can download one right away. This feature separates the Kindle from the competition. Right now, the Kindle's primary competition is Sony's Reader Digital Book and it requires consumers to physically connect the reader to a computer to download a new ebook. Currently the Kindle (via Amazon) is offering many top-selling books and new releases for around \$9.99 each. Per Amazon, the company offers 90,000 titles that can be accessed with the Kindle as it has wireless internet access built in directly to its' site. In addition, rumor has it Amazon is negotiating with textbook publishers to better reach the student market.

The Kindle is relatively light, at just over 10 ounces. Like the Sony Digital Reader, it features the revolutionary e-ink technology developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, which duplicates the look of a book page pretty faithfully with no glare. If you turn the wireless off when you're not using it, the battery will last several days to a week. Amazon says the Kindle will hold up to 200 books and has space for a media card to store even more.

There are always caveats to any new technology and in this case there are some considerations for further improvements. The new Kindle is in the \$400 range and the prior version is now in the \$200 range. The \$200 range is much more palatable. The Kindle has a lot of other add-ons, like a Web-browser and the ability to send and receive e-mail (each Kindle comes with a free e-mail account). You can also buy monthly subscriptions to magazines, books, newspapers, and even some blogs. However, they may be perceived as detractors from the primary purpose of the Kindle as a new way to just read books. The device is a little clunky and currently only a black-and-white screen, too, and not all images are included. However, as we look to the future and broader use of the Kindle, it will be important to have color versus just black and white, touch screen and the ability to interact with it at a greater level will make a difference especially as it relates to student use and online learning.

All this said about the Kindle, it's more about the digital reader and learning, than a specific product. The Kindle is the "popular" example that resonates with today's marketplace.

### ***eBooks, Kindle, Higher Education and Beyond***

As noted, higher education publishers are working with Amazon (owner of the Kindle) to offer more learning books. Based on even the latest Kindle, it would essentially be an electronic version of the textbook. To that end, as we look beyond today and into the very near future, this is where there is a tremendous opportunity to totally innovate what the Kindle can do. Or, shall we consider the innovative concept of the iPhindleberry (aka the not yet created iKindleberry) that is a phone, camera, book reader, internet accessible education tool that will be the communication and learning device of the future that will change the way we approach, access, interact, and manage not only higher education learning but all learning (K-12, corporate training, self-directed). For now, we will call it the iPhindleberry because we were smart enough to come up with this kitschy name. The iPhindleberry is a plausible proposition for the next innovation for Amazon, or even Apple, Sony, or some start-up looking to make its mark; and, it will clearly make a mark. Until then, it's our job to push the marketplace and concept ideas that get us the tools via innovative technology design that help us make learning, communicating and life easier. In this context, easier is not a bad thing.

Beyond just making a difference in learning, the innovative concept of the iPhindleberry of tomorrow greatly supports the effort to be "green" in today's world. eBooks/DLAs truly align with the "go-green" ideology.

The proposition is to keep pushing forward and innovate in a way that positively impacts the way we live, communicate and learn.

It is pretty phenomenal that the journey has begun to [positively have a profound impact on how we learn and the face of education as we know it today. Columbus explored an uncharted physical world, today we get to explore and develop the new era of learning and technology, if not tomorrow then hopefully very soon it will be available.

**Sources:**

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