One Semester of Kindles for all Students a Clearwater High School

Many people have heard about Clearwater High School’s project to give all students in this large, public high school a Kindle to store and eventually replace all of their print textbooks. People often ask, “What were the results of the project?” I have to laugh a little because we are certainly just getting started. This September we registered and handed out over 2,100 Kindles with math textbooks, classroom sets of novels, two local newspapers, Student Code of Conduct and free supplemental materials from CK-12. We are now working on getting the language arts literature texts on the Kindle devices early in the second semester and then adding science next year as part of the normal textbook adoption cycle. Although we are just beginning this major undertaking that was the brainchild of the innovative principal Keith Mastorides, we have already learned a lot. When I was asked by World Reader to write a guest piece for their blog, I thought it was a great opportunity to share our journey so far, and where we plan to go from here.

This journey to just get where we are today has taken a lot of effort from Mr. Mastorides, along with Bonnie Kelley and Jim Bence from our Office of Library Media/Technology. It has also taken effort from staff, parent volunteers, and students at Clearwater HS. When we had our first conversation with many of the vendors during the last school year, the iPad had just been announced. Even though no one had one, the buzz was terrific. This is where Keith got the inspiration for this project, but an iPad for every student with the $500 per student price plus the fees for 3G service per month, he realized that this was not going to be in the budget. He called me in to talk about other devices, and we talked about the Kindle, Nook, Sony e-reader, and other e-reader tablet devices since he wanted students to access materials digitally and have access to the web. He was very excited about the prospects and after some evaluation, we decided on the Kindle as it had the most available titles, limited mobile web access, and a durable form factor. The price point of around $249 at the time (even less a few months later) with no additional connection costs was also very attractive. Our first call with Amazon was to find out about other schools that had done this to learn from them. We were shocked to learn that this would be the first project of its kind in K-12! In some of the many articles about our project, we would read commenters post about other comparable projects, and we would always follow-up only to find out they bought them but have not implemented or it was a much smaller scale. We heard about the higher education pilot programs with Kindles and learned that we would have to work closely with our Exception Education department to insure that there weren’t any ADA issues. Many of the other lessons learned were not applicable to K-12 where the textbooks are provided by the school, rather than purchased by the students.
We then talked with all of our textbook publishers about the project. We got answers ranging from this is not possible to refusal to participate. Not taking “no” for an answer, the Pinellas team was on weekly conference calls with Amazon (that we continue to this day) and calls to all of the publishers to convince them of the merits of the project. Our stubbornness and persistence eventually paid off with all of the publishers signed on to the project. We then had to manage progress and hiccups of conversion of the e-texts into Kindle format, more conference calls and more explaining. We settled on the six inch 2nd Generation Kindle which came with Whispernet access to the mobile web, a limited browser that we took to the makers of our student portal to insure that it would work. They made it operable with some minor changes to their software, and Mr. Mastorides was very excited because many students that did not have access to computers at home, never mind the internet, would have this very limited at the time mobile browser for accessing the student portal and other text sites for research. We ordered 120 for teachers to have access to the 2nd Generation Kindles over the summer and get acclimated to them. When we were about to place the order for the students over the summer, the Kindle 2 was discontinued and the Latest Generation Kindle was announced. Although we were excited to hear about the advanced features of the new device, we had been testing the 2nd Generation Kindle device for months. We would also be receiving the devices the first week of school, rather than several weeks before school as originally planned.

We pressed forward with a plan to setup 2,100 Kindle in 3 days. We had 2 clerical temps, Mrs. Kelley’s entire office staff, the media center staff, and a team of parent volunteers spend the first two days registering accounts on Amazon using Gmail accounts setup for each student. Textbook barcodes were affixed, and labels were created for each Kindle with the login information including usernames and passwords. From the minute the first box arrived, we had three production lines involved with unboxing, labeling, registering, and inventorying all 2,100 Kindles using our textbook circulation system. On the last day, we recruited some students to help us with their fast fingers to register directly on the Kindles themselves. Mr. Bence, our resident Kindle expert, created a spreadsheet of the texts and novels that needed to be loaded to each Kindle and sent that up to Amazon to have them loaded books based on the classes that they attended and the Kindle assigned to them.

We recently had a set of “Vegas Rules” feedback sessions with randomly selected students and teachers at Clearwater HS after one semester of use. We confirmed some things we expected and received other surprising feedback. For one, we knew that we were having issues with students deregistering the school account and registering their personal account interfering with the download of books. The lack of enterprise controls on the Kindle made this tough to avoid, but something we needed to address with more awareness. Sometimes when the device did not download or did not work, the teachers would not know enough to
troubleshoot and abandoned using them. Based on this feedback, we came up with a plan to offer help sessions with four experts in the media center that teachers and students could bring their devices in to get fixed. We also learned that, even though parents had the option to purchase insurance and pay a small deductible to get their Kindle replaced, students still were not bringing broken Kindles in for fear of getting in trouble. With these types of issues, you can imagine some teachers were relying on other methods (such as the class set of textbooks that were provided) to conduct work with textbooks. Some students were even told to keep them put away or not bring them out in class. Research tells us that teachers have a lot of autonomy on what technology they choose to use when they “shut the door,” but obviously more had to be done. We also knew that students were taking advantage of the Latest Generation Kindle with 3G access and enhanced browser to access sites that were not exactly educational, such as Facebook. We have been communicating with Amazon on our weekly calls about a “parental controls” option that would help with this, and it is currently under consideration. Color was also a consideration, and we heard conflicting feedback about the grayscale screens. For science textbooks next year, we already plan on looking into other devices to checkout for classes with the Kindle app that will run in color.

Not all of the feedback was about challenges though. Students were using them to take notes in some cases, and in one class they even took an online test that the teacher had put on the student portal which uses the Moodle Course Management System. Students often used the student portal to check grades and attendance on the device and talk with teachers right on the spot. Some students really enjoyed reading the novels that were loaded as part of their language arts classes, and most had read at least one book the first semester. We heard about teachers using them for research assignments in class where students were directed to use their Kindle to obtain current events and other information that is readily available for free in digital format. World language teachers were having students read content from around the world and even a local paper translated in different languages. Students were excited about using the devices and many of the teachers were too. Many teachers did not know about what other teachers were doing with the devices, but really good usage was happening in pockets. From this feedback, we will be developing a “model classroom” with one of the teachers and the help of the great TV production program at Clearwater HS that will help us document and share with other teachers at the school and eventually around the world.

The training in pre-service days with Amazon and staff at the school was not enough for every teacher to feel comfortable and, if they did, even know exactly what to do with them. Since it’s common to have the student “turn to page 8” in a standard textbook, teachers were trying to have the students navigate based on the page number in Kindle using the “Go To” function rather than having them use the “Search” function to have students find the heading of text that they need to locate in the books. More training was definitely needed and more
information to provide them with basic use and troubleshooting. Since this has never been
done before, it is hard to know what would need to be trained, but we are learning and
adapting. There is probably a very small amount of teachers who just don’t want this to work
but most do. From our feedback sessions, they need more materials and more support that
needs to be timely. As in other one-to-one’s with laptops, if they are going to be an
instructional tool they need to work for the teacher with little effort, and students need to
know they will be held accountable and “my Kindle is broke” is not an acceptable answer.

After just over 4 months of a Kindle in every student’s hands, we have learned a lot and
broken some huge barriers. In September, we pushed a pre-survey of students’ reading habits,
and at the end of the year my hope is we will see increases in reading by our students on our
post-survey. We are really learning the challenges of this project, and we have a very
passionate and dedicated team that will continue to work hard to insure success of the project.
So when people ask, “What are the results of that project?” I tell them we are not there yet,
but we working hard to implement the first e-reader one-to-one project in the country, and the
excitement and commitment to make digital texts a success is still there from day one.