Building Proficiency Through Personalized Reading: Capstone Digital’s myON reader

By Todd Brekhus - President, Capstone Digital

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“Millions of American children get to fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. And that puts them on the dropout track.”

Educators and others know that reading is a critical skill for success in school. It’s the foundation for learning not only in language arts, but also in subject areas such as social studies, science, and mathematics.

Yet we also know that many children begin school with little or no prereading skill, and many students are poor readers. When the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzed data from the reading component of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it found that more than two-thirds of all 4th graders failed to attain the “proficient” level, and a third didn’t even reach the “basic” level. The problem is particularly acute for children from low income families, with 83 percent falling below “proficient” and 49 percent below “basic.”

This situation leaves millions of students at risk for poor performance in academic subjects, failure, and dropping out. A Casey Foundation report titled Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters (Fiester, 2010) notes that “a major cause of retention is failure to master the knowledge and content needed to progress on time—and that, in a great many cases, is the result of not being able to read proficiently as early as fourth grade” (p. 7, emphasis added). The report continues: “Millions of American children get to fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. And that puts them on the dropout track.”

It’s no surprise that reading proficiency is a critical early marker on the path to graduating—or not. According to the Children’s Reading Foundation, at least 85 percent of the curriculum is delivered via reading. Furthermore, 4th graders who are reading at only a 1st or 2nd grade level (about 25 percent of all 4th graders) understand less than a third to a half of the printed curriculum they encounter from that point on—and the situation worsens as they progress through the system. By the time they reach high school, many simply give up.

Clearly, the “dropout track” is not where we want our students to be. In addition to the personal loss to students that dropout, the costs to society are enormous in terms of lost productivity, decreased global competitiveness, and increased social expenditures. Making sure that all children can read—and read well—is thus a matter of urgency with implications far beyond the classroom.
Motivating Students Through Personalized Reading

A fundamental step in creating good readers is to tap into children’s motivation—to make them eager to read. Indeed, a recent guide from the U.S. Department of Education (2010) includes this recommendation among its five suggestions for improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade: “Establish an engaging and motivating context in which to teach reading comprehension.”

An effective way to implement this recommendation is through a program that uses “personalized reading.” Personalized reading puts the student at the center of the learning environment, because it—

• is based on students’ interests and preferences,
• takes into account students’ level of ability, and
• accommodates students’ individual learning styles and strengths.

Interests and preferences. Giving students choices of what to read, based on their interests and preferences, is a sure-fire way to increase their motivation. Furthermore, research indicates that students can improve in reading simply by reading books they find interesting (Shin & Krashen, 2007). Personalized reading emphasizes choice linked to interests and preferences.

Ability level. Accommodating students’ varying ability levels is an important component of successful reading programs (White & Kim, 2008). But doing so can be challenging; today’s elementary classrooms are filled with children with a wide range of abilities, including some who are already reading when they enter kindergarten or 1st grade and others who lack even the most basic prereading skills. Others may have learning disabilities; and, of course, those whose first language is not English face the prospect of learning to recognize and translate words that are totally unfamiliar. Personalized reading recognizes this variation and ensures that students have materials that are appropriate for their ability level—challenging enough so that they make progress in developing or improving necessary skills, but not so difficult that they lose their motivation to persist.

Learning styles and strengths. Howard Gardner’s groundbreaking work on multiple intelligences paved the way for widespread acceptance of the related notion of learning styles. Although there are many different categorizations of learning styles, one of the most common is the VAK model, which identifies visual learners, who respond well to seeing images; auditory learners, who learn best through listening; and kinesthetic or tactile learners, who benefit from learning experiences that involve movement, touching, and doing. A personalized reading program can cater to different learning styles and strengths.
The Benefits of Personalized Reading

The primary benefit of personalized reading is its ability to jump-start motivation by focusing on the three elements noted above (interests and preferences, ability level, and learning styles and strengths). Students gain some control over their learning because personalized reading gives them more of what they want—books on topics they’d like to learn more about; and it eliminates what they don’t want: the frustration associated with reading something that’s too easy or too difficult.

Improved motivation leads students to spend more time reading because they perceive it as an enjoyable and appealing activity. And the increased time reading contributes to higher achievement in reading (Roman, Carran, & Fiore, 2010). Once they’ve learned how to decode words, students who read more gain greater fluency—the ability to read phrases and sentences smoothly and quickly and to understand meaning, which is obviously the key to improved scores on the reading comprehension portions of assessments.

By increasing proficiency and fluency, personalized reading gives students the foundation they need for success in all subject areas, not just language arts. Fluent readers can more easily assimilate the text-based content—both print and digital—they encounter in science, math, social studies, the arts, and other subjects. They attain the self-confidence that comes from knowing that they possess a critical tool for unlocking knowledge and developing understanding.

Because personalized reading acknowledges the importance of diverse learning styles, it offers students more avenues to success. By combining different modes of learning (auditory and visual, for example) in a multimodal approach, personalized reading can improve children’s ability to understand the meaning of words they see and hear. Research shows that “involving multiple senses increases learning and retention” (Locke, 2002). More specifically, “students using well-designed combinations of visuals and text learn more than students who only use text” (Metiri Group, 2008).

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## Technology as a Vehicle for Personalized Reading

Technology provides an ideal vehicle for delivering personalized learning in general, and reading in particular. Indeed, in introducing the Department of Education’s National Education Technology Plan in 2010, Secretary Arne Duncan noted that “the model of learning described in this plan calls for engaging and empowering personalized learning experiences ... [and] stipulates that we focus on what and how we teach to match what people need to know and how they learn.”

Today’s students live and learn in a technology-rich environment. Even though many come to school without the background and experience traditionally associated with academic success, they may be completely adept with the digital interfaces and functions of computer games and mobile devices.

Using technology to deliver a personalized reading program can increase the power of this approach. Consider the following possibilities, from the students’ point of view:

- Students can easily locate books they’re interested in reading using a simple search function, with key words related to a title or topic.
- Students can access books that are enhanced with illustrations, photos, animation, sound, music, and narration.
- Students can read on their own, at their own pace, but with options that provide important scaffolds and supports, such as links to dictionary definitions of unfamiliar words and highlighting of words or sentences as they’re being read aloud.
- Students can gain fluency as they listen to text being read out loud while they read along silently, an option that’s beneficial to all students, but particularly to English language learners who must learn pronunciation as well as meaning.
- Students can keep track of their progress—how many books they’ve read, improvements in their reading level—and see the results in automatically generated charts and graphs.
- Students can participate in a personalized social reading environment, sharing their thoughts about what they’ve read with friends, family, teachers, and others.
- Students can master 21st Century skills while they learn reading. 21st Century student outcomes include reading and core subjects, communication and collaboration skills, and ICT (information and communication technology) literacy.

These possibilities suggest important ways that technology can accelerate and multiply the benefits of personalized reading, melding the best of 21st-century innovation with an effective approach for improving reading proficiency.
Capstone Digital’s myON Reader

Capstone, publisher of the largest school library collection in the United States, has developed a personalized literacy solution called myON™ reader that gives PreK-8 students 24/7 access to hundreds of dynamic, digital books on topics they want to read about, incorporating text, pictures, sound, narration, music, animation, and photos. The colorful and engaging platform is designed to improve reading proficiency by targeting individual interests and providing multimodal supports—and it’s available at school, at home, at the library, or any other place with an Internet connection.

As first-time users, students complete a simple interest inventory that helps to determine what nonfiction topics (like sports, animals, hobbies) and fiction genres (like mysteries, science fiction), they’re most interested in and a Lexile® placement test that measures their reading ability. myON reader uses the results of these two tools to create a unique recommended reading list for each student, including books that will be both appealing and appropriate for the student’s reading level. The Lexile measure also provides a starting point for reports that will show the student’s growth trajectory over time.

When students choose a digital book to read, they can also choose options that will support their reading fluency, language acquisition, and vocabulary development. For example, audio narration—with actors, not artificial digital “voices,” reading the text—allows students to hear words as well as see them. A highlighting tool provides a visual scaffold by highlighting individual words or sentences as the text is read aloud. Embedded dictionary links provide direct access to definitions, smoothing the path to comprehension. In addition to building students’ reading proficiency and self-confidence over time, these scaffolds facilitate independent reading. And the simple interface allows children to navigate easily on their own.

As students read the selections on their customized lists, periodic benchmark tests provide data for graphs that show their progress and forecast future reading ability. Seeing these visual indicators of proficiency keeps students motivated and excited about reading; they want to see an upward trajectory. And the results automatically generate additional titles for recommended reading, based on the students’ newly measured level of ability. As their skills improve, their reading lists evolve to include more advanced texts; and if results indicate that easier books would be a better match, the recommendations change accordingly.

myON reader also offers a personalized social reading environment, where students can rate and review books they’ve read and see others’ reviews, sharing opinions in a safe, secure context. This peer-to-peer feature further enhances the appeal of reading. Teachers can also educate students at a young age the features and steps...
Hillsborough County School District

“Teachers often assign reading time as homework and they will be able to hold them accountable easily.”

to use social networking safely and effectively, key elements of collaboration and communication skills, outlined in the 21st Century Skill movement, and using myON reader as their platform.

A student-centric focus is the defining characteristic of myON reader, but its features and benefits also extend to teachers, administrators, librarians, and parents.

Teachers can use system-generated customized reading lists for individual students, groups, and classes, with the assurance that the choices match students’ ability levels. Lists for groups and classes can also be developed based on state and district standards. Teacher created lists appear on the students’ myON reader home pages, so students can access them at any time, from any Internet connection. Teachers can drill down to get information on individual students and monitor their progress by the benchmark tests, end-of-book quizzes, number of books read, and time spent reading. Teachers can also quickly identify students who are forecasted to not score well on the end-of-year exam in reading, allowing the educator an opportunity to provide additional practice-time to these students. With its user-friendly interface, including the ability to easily activate or deactivate the various scaffolding tools (e.g., highlighting and audio options), quizzes, and reviews, myON reader becomes an integral partner in the goal of individualized, differentiated instruction.

Administrators can quickly monitor results and progress at the student, classroom, grade, or school level. They can identify gaps and problem areas that may need attention, and develop strategies to improve results over time.

Librarians can leverage myON reader to build and maintain a diverse collection of popular books, with unlimited, concurrent access that vastly expands the number of titles available. Literally hundreds of children can be reading the same book at the same time. By reviewing the students’ interest inventories, librarians can see what topics and genres are most popular and expand their other resources accordingly. And because myON reader eliminates costs related to repairing damaged books or replacing lost copies, the library’s precious dollars go further.

Parents can become partners in improving reading proficiency, encouraging their children to use myON reader at home and sharing in their pride of accomplishment by viewing the progress charts.
Making a Difference

Data from districts showcase the impact digital books can have. In Charleston, South Carolina, for example, the average print book in school libraries circulated 10 times a year. The average digital book was read 337 times. In other words, title turnover was more than 30 times greater for digital books. More children were reading more books.

Similarly, in Hillsborough County, Florida, struggling readers in grades 2 through 5 attended a summer reading camp to boost their skills. During the six-week session, 246 digital books were available, and with concurrent access, the students read the equivalent of 160,000 books—far more than would have been available if the program had relied only on print resources.

These examples suggest the potential of myON reader and digital books to transform the context in which children not only learn to read, but also learn to love reading. The more they read, the more proficient they become, and with over a thousand of digital titles at their fingertips—geared to their interests and ability level—the next fun-to-read book is just a few clicks away. With myON reader, Capstone Digital has taken personalized reading to a new level of effectiveness, capturing the power of the technology that students already enjoy, and using it to build the foundational reading skills they need to succeed.
Gallup McKinley County Schools

Located in rural New Mexico less than 20 miles from the Arizona border, is preparing to overcome many challenges to integrate technology into their literacy program and to provide a unique opportunity for the entire community. With attendance boundaries spanning more than five thousand square miles, much of which is located on the Navajo Indian Reservation, the district’s attendance zone is larger than the entire state of New Jersey. The student population comes from a rich heritage based in tradition and unique culture and nearly 82% of the student population is Native American with approximately 80% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Despite the challenges associated with a large percentage of English Language Learners, a huge attendance zone, and high poverty, striving to provide innovative solutions that enhance student-learning opportunities, Gallup McKinley County Schools is one of the Nation’s first districts to provide a personalized reading environment to students.

School administrators firmly believe in “partnering together for student success,” and Gallup administrators have set out to work with Capstone Digital in order to provide extended opportunities for all students to grow in their reading skills and find passion for reading.

By choosing myON reader, Gallup McKinley County schools makes engaging, interactive digital books available to students and families in their community anywhere, anytime they have access to the Internet thus making it possible for siblings to learn together and for parents and children to share in rich literacy experiences that extend learning long after the school buildings are closed.

In use at the majority of the district’s 21st Century Learning Centers, myON reader motivates students to attend after school programs where they have opportunities to read more. Administrators have noted that attendance is increasing, students are reading an average of five books each month and they anticipate that Lexile scores in Gallup will continue to increase with an increase in reading as will the love of reading.

myON reader allows students to choose their books in the same way they choose their music and their videos in their leisure time. With the digital native in mind, safe, social learning tools embedded within myON reader, students now have a unique opportunity to create reading communities and to share their reading experiences. Still new in their implementation, myON reader is motivating Gallup students to read which will lead to documented growth in student reading achievement.
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Before joining Capstone, Todd held a variety of executive positions, including Vice President and CMO of PLATO Learning, President and COO of Learning Elements, and Education Program Director for MCI WorldCom, where he helped build and implement the Marco Polo program. Todd also spent eight years in education as a teacher, department chair, and Technology Director and currently serves on the Board of the Educational Division of The Software Information Industry Association. A graduate of Concordia College, Todd completed graduate studies at John Hopkins University.

Sources


