iPods as Reading Tools

While some people still believe that listening to books is no substitute for reading them, some reading experts believe that listening to books is a great tool to help students develop their reading skills. In fact, the Commission on Reading reports: “The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.” Studies have shown that audio books help students expand their vocabulary and develop reading fluency because they can listen to books that would be difficult for them to read.

As a teacher in the Resource Specialist Program at Clement Middle School, I face a daily challenge to deliver grade-level content to my students, all of whom are struggling readers. When I first began teaching, a “listening center” was a staple in most elementary classrooms, and experienced teachers told me that it was a great way to help students who were having a hard time reading. As years went on, I continued to offer this alternative to my students whenever I felt they needed it.

High Tech in a Small Package

Earlier this year, our principal announced that the school library had purchased several iPod shuffles. These are highly popular technological devices, about the size of a pack of gum, that allow users to listen to digitally recorded audio (most often music) downloaded from their computer. At Clement, they caught on quickly as an alternative to books on tape and compact discs, and I began sending my Resource Program students to the library to check them out for silent reading. The library offered many digitally recorded titles and soon students were checking them out on their own.

The iPods proved so popular that our principal purchased a set that teachers could check out for classroom use. I jumped at the chance to experi-

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ment with them and they were a smash hit with my seventh graders. I simply loaded our literature anthology stories from a compact disc into my iTunes (the database for digital files), then downloaded the story that I wanted to teach that day onto the individual iPod shuffles. The first time, it took me about 30 minutes to get them ready. Then I discovered that my eighth-grade teaching assistant knew more about iPods than I did. She took over and it now takes her about 15 minutes to prepare the iPods for me.

**Listen and Read**

Now, every time I introduce a new story from our literature anthology, I use the iPods. They don’t replace reading instruction and I don’t use them every day, but they are great tools for giving students an opportunity to read difficult material independently. The iPods help enhance their comprehension and vocabulary skills, and give students the sense of the “big picture” in a story rather than bogging them down with mechanics. I have noticed that when my students read a story and listen to it on their iPods, they have a better grasp of the main ideas and are better prepared to discuss the theme and plot. Many of my students have iPods of their own, with audiobooks loaded onto them by me or the school librarian.

The best reason for using iPods is that student comprehension is greatly improved by information entering simultaneously through audio and visual channels. I also can use iTalk to record me or my students reading chapters, poetry, or textbook selections that can be directly loaded onto iPods. A great idea is loading chapters from content areas like social studies and science to help struggling readers with their homework assignments.

Using the iPods has definitely increased my students’ motivation to read. It also has improved their level of confidence and given them access to more difficult material. There are thousands of books that can be downloaded and there are Web sites that offer titles for a small fee, as well as stores that rent or sell titles on compact discs. Once you have a digital file stored on your computer, you can load it onto as many iPod shuffles as you wish.

When my students began to read the novel *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, I simply loaded the novel onto their iPods, several chapters at a time, and allowed them to read along while listening. In the future, I plan to also load chapters of content area textbooks onto iPods for my students to use in their general education classes. They will also be able to check them out for homework purposes. The possibilities are endless when students enjoy learning with the aid of technology, especially with something as cool as an iPod!

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