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Engage to achieve: using mobile technologies to enthuse reluctant readers

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Next steps](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





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Summary

The need to engage reluctant students in reading has been highlighted in research in Australia and overseas. Recent studies have suggested that new technologies have the potential to simultaneously engage readers, while consolidating their higher-order thinking and comprehension skills, and personal and collaborative responses to texts.

With this understanding, a network of four primary schools in Tasmania worked together to explore the potential of mobile technologies to enthuse reluctant readers, expose them to a range of multimodal texts, build their understanding of inference, and provide opportunities for online, collaborative communication.

This strategy merged best-practice comprehension strategies and mobile technologies to engage year 6 students at or below the National Benchmark in reading online texts. Engagement in reading was facilitated through the use of a range of multimodal texts, personal and collaborative responses to these texts, and year 9 reading mentors.

Target student group

Year 6 students in four primary schools in Tasmania were the focus of this strategy.

Method

The need to engage students in reading

The principals of the four schools in the Tasmanian network were concerned about those year 6 students in their school at or below National Benchmarks in reading. These students were disengaged from reading and no other intervention had worked to improve their capacity to infer meaning in texts. The principals were therefore keen to support a program specifically designed for these interrelated purposes: to develop students' enthusiasm for reading; to support them in comprehending inference contained in online texts; and responding to these texts using personal reflection and collaborative discussion. In addition, it was hoped that these students would be better able to make the transition to secondary school if they had improved confidence and self-esteem in reading and an enhanced capacity to use a range of technological tools and devices.



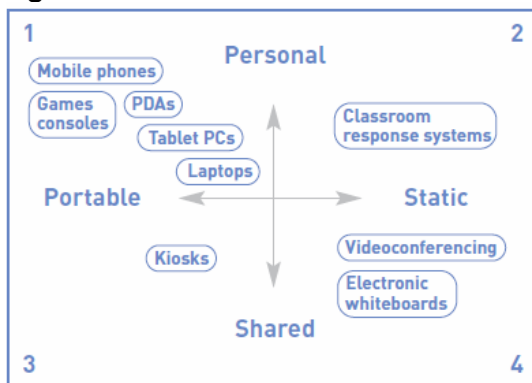
The Engage to Achieve strategy

Engage to Achieve was designed and facilitated by Michelle Cresdee, who worked across the four schools supporting teachers to implement the online reading program. Michelle was also responsible for the transition program that operated between these primary schools and the local high school.

Before designing the reading program, Michelle embarked on research into best-practice strategies in reading comprehension and the use of mobile technologies to support reading engagement. The reading strategies that teachers would incorporate into their sessions with the students were based on successful strategies for students in the middle years of schooling (eg Hornsby, Parry & Sukarna 1992; Beers 2003).

Michelle also read classroom-based research studies on mobile technologies and e-based schools and conducted a meta-analysis of the types of technologies used by other teachers (eg podcasts, talking books), and illustrated here (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula & Sharples 2006):

Figure 1: Classification of mobile technologies



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Detailed description of image

This diagram shows a cross with four quadrants. The points of the cross end in arrows. The points are labelled: Personal, Static, Shared and Portable.

Portable and Personal quadrant:

- Mobile phones
- Games consoles

- PDAs
- Tablet PCs
- Laptops

Portable and Static quadrant:

- Classroom response systems

Static and Shared quadrant:

- Videoconferencing
- Electronic whiteboards

Shared and Portable quadrant:

- Kiosks

Michelle also contacted academics with an interest in the interrelationship between new literacies and technology (Dr Andrew Fluck and Dr Angela Thomas from the University of Tasmania), and conducted research to see if the reading tasks and strategies she had in mind would work on all forms of mobile technology.

The online reading program was trialled in 2010 and repeated in 2011, with some modification. Details are included here:



2010 trial (24 students)	2011 program (24 students)
10 weeks: Students accessed selected texts via a touch-screen computer and used Wikispaces as a collaborative tool.	15 weeks (3 × 5 weeks): Students accessed texts via a touch-screen computer and switched from using Wikispaces to OneNote* software.
Session 1: Introduction to a text (following Guided Reading protocols). A collaborative task would be set and completed by each group. Response task was also introduced.	Session 1: Introduction to a text (following Guided Reading protocols). A collaborative task would be set and completed by each group. Response task was also introduced.
Session 2: Year 9 reading mentors from the local high school would support students in beginning their response to the text (eg helping students to read the text, drawing out more elaborate responses, helping students to use the technology to post their response).	Session 2: Year 9 reading mentors from the local high school would support students in beginning their response to the text (eg helping students to read the text, drawing out more elaborate responses, helping students to use the technology to post their response).
Session 3: Students were required to negotiate with their teacher for time to work on independent tasks.	Session 3: Students were required to negotiate with their teacher for time to work on independent tasks.
Session 4: Students presented their responses to the text to the members of their group and engaged in discussion around the text.	Session 4: Students presented their responses to the text to the members of their group and engaged in discussion around the text.

*The change of program platform from Wikispaces to OneNote allowed students greater collaboration and more flexible delivery of their text responses. Types of tasks included reading from author Paul Jennings's website and writing him letters and online messages (to which he replied); watching news stories on the televised program *Behind the News*, reading transcripts of the episodes and then creating persuasive texts which were uploaded onto the Behind the News message board; reading information about different countries on the Kids National Geographic website and creating postcards from individually selected countries; critiquing tourism websites using de Bono's Six Thinking Hat strategy; and analysing the lyrics of popular songs in a double-entry journal format.

Note: For her innovative work on the Engage to Achieve program, Michelle Cresdee was awarded the Microsoft Teacher of the Year (Tasmania) award.



Results

'The program was exciting, varied and engaging. Students received help and feedback – (they were) closely monitored and encouraged. Students knew what was expected and that they had to follow through.' (Classroom Teacher 2)

The results from the first year's trial of the online reading program show there were some improvements in students' reading comprehension, as measured by NAPLAN. However, the data on a complementary standardised test for reading (Neale 1999) conducted on students in the 2011 program, showed impressive improvements in reading comprehension. Significant gains were evident between the test administered before the start of the online reading program and after its completion. These data suggest that:

1. the students' comprehension of the texts they read had improved
2. the decrease in their reading rate is suggestive of a reader slowing down his or her pace to comprehend a text. The average difference in comprehension over the eight-month period of the online reading program (determined as Reading Age) is +12.9.

The increase in students' engagement in reading and the concomitant improvement in their capacity to comprehend a range of online texts is reflected in the student survey results.



Student survey results (19 responses)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I have enjoyed the project.	9	9	1		
I have improved my behaviour during the project.	1	6	10	1	1
I have improved my organisational skills during this project.	6	9	4		
I have improved my computer skills during this project.	10	9			
I have become more independent in my work habits during this project.	4	10	4	1	
I have improved my reading skills during this project.	12	6	1		
I have increased my confidence with my school work during this project.	5	7	4	2	1
I have increased my confidence in other areas during this project.	5	7	6	1	
I think this project is beneficial to me.	12	6	1		



Of note is the number of strongly agree/agree responses to questions related to students' enjoyment of the reading program; their perception of the benefits of the program; their awareness of an improvement in reading and computer skills; and their growth in confidence and as independent learners. Interview quotes from students add to these perspectives:

'We can trust each other to talk about things with each other.' (Student, year 6)

'I improved my reading skills which is really important for the future.' (Student, year 6)

'It's a great way to have fun and learn.' (Student, year 6)

'I enjoyed helping the younger children learn and watching their progress.' (Student mentor, year 9)

Survey results from parents confirm students' enjoyment of the online reading program and their development in computer skills, confidence and independence. The benefits of the program were also confirmed. However, the parents' sense of improvement in their child's reading skills range from a strong through to a neutral position. This range may suggest that some parents were able to discern that their child had demonstrated a greater enthusiasm for reading and was more able to comprehend meaning from texts, while others were less able or confident to make this judgement.

Teacher surveys again confirm students' enjoyment of the reading program; the benefits of the program; their improvement in computer skills; and their growth in confidence and as independent learners. These perceptions are also corroborated by the comment of one teacher who observed the impact of the program on:

'The way that the group organised themselves to be ready and make sure that tasks were completed and the resilience shown when things were changed or problems were faced.' (Classroom Teacher)

Nevertheless, while all teachers agreed that the program improved the students' reading skills (and in this case, the capacity to infer meaning from texts), only three teachers out of ten strongly agreed with this contention.



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The unexpected outcomes of the program relate to the different ways that student learning exceeded expectations. Among these, for example, many students became leaders back in their classrooms, exhibiting a new-found confidence having experienced success in the online reading program. Teachers also noted that students' involvement in the program equipped them very well for the transition to secondary school.

Lessons learned

Reluctant readers who have experienced little success in comprehending the complex texts they encounter as they move through primary school and on to secondary school can be engaged in reading through the use of mobile technologies. The creative teaching of reading through these technologies can enhance students' capacity to comprehend a range of texts.

The online reading program also impacted on teachers' pedagogy. Enthused by the educative potential of mobile technologies and the OneNote tool, the teachers involved in the program began to integrate these tools and devices into other areas of the curriculum. The teachers encouraged and supported each other to learn about the potential of the technology and shared their successes in the classroom.

Next steps

Teachers involved in the online reading program expressed a desire to continue using mobile technologies to support their students' literacy development and to transfer their knowledge into future classrooms. They were also enthusiastic about incorporating the OneNote tool for this purpose.

The principals were eager to sustain a similar program, although they were aware that the intensive delivery of the online reading workshops across the network of schools is dependent on a coordinator/facilitator.

Research base

Innovative strategies have been designed by literacy educators to support and enhance literacy learning and engage reluctant readers, or students who are struggling to comprehend the more complex texts they encounter as they move through the middle years of schooling (see Hammett & Sandford (eds) 2008; Lankshear & Knobel 2011; Snyder (ed) 2002). These strategies include the use of new technologies that assist students to increase their interaction with multimodal texts and to actively make meaning from the texts they read. Notwithstanding the learning potential of new technologies (Koehler & Mishra 2008), studies have highlighted the need for teachers to develop new



forms of pedagogy that support students to develop simultaneous control of textual and multimodal literacies, and critical thinking around print and web-based texts (Simpson & Walsh 2010; Unsworth 2008).

Further reading and links

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Contacts

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