

*What's Next*  
**Curling Up with E-Readers**  
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## EDUCATION

## Curling Up with E-Readers

► Efforts to improve global literacy typically focus on getting books into the hands of children. Could electronic reading devices leapfrog old-fashioned paper books and catalyze a new culture of reading in places like sub-Saharan Africa? That's the idea behind Worldreader.org, a start-up nonprofit with world-changing aspirations.

Dispensing Kindles and other e-readers in the developing world may seem like a fancy solution to a low-tech problem. But Worldreader founder David Risher, a former Amazon executive, says the big goal is to drive down "the cost per book read to the absolute lowest it can be." Reading selections in many village schools are too limited and, he adds, often too Western to engage young readers. If donated books gather dust in the back of classrooms, they do little to engender a love of reading.

"Lack of access to books has been solved by e-books," says Risher, noting that thousands of titles are available as digital books. "But there's no market-driven plan to get e-readers to the developing world." Worldreader, strong on corporate experience, intends to "prime the market pump," he says, "and put thousands of books into millions of kids' hands."

The infrastructure for supporting e-readers already exists in much of the developing world, thanks to a network for connecting and charging mobile phones in even the most remote regions.

E-readers use the same network to download books. During Worldreader's trial in a village school in Ghana, students used an existing solar charging station to power up their Kindles, which were donated by Amazon. Their comfort with mobile phones and texting meant students had little trouble using e-reader features such as an online dictionary or text-to-speech capability. Because the devices include a built-in light source, students were able to introduce family members to a new activity: reading at home after dark.

Jonathan Wareham, professor and director of research at ESADE in Barcelona, Spain, has been studying Worldreader's early efforts. The low cost of distributing digital books offers great potential to improve literacy, he says, but the idea is not without challenges. Technical issues will be the easiest to solve, he predicts. "Getting the supporting ecosystem around the device itself is where the work is."

To gain traction, Worldreader needs to create "a system of content, distribution, pedagogy, administrative, cultural, and political support. These challenges are nothing less than massive," Wareham admits. "You go in expecting to address literacy, and you end up trying to rewrite cultural rules."

Teachers may find e-readers easier to adopt than classroom computers because they don't call for a wholesale change of teaching methods. "Teachers already know how to use books," Risher says. Compared with technology initiatives like One Laptop per Child, Worldreader

"is trying to solve a narrower problem," he adds.

Nor is Worldreader interested in pursuing a brick-and-mortar solution. Risher applauds global school-building initiatives like Room to Read, but says his organization is focusing on "the other side of the same coin. When people come together to learn, they still need access to books—as many as possible."

Ideally, those books will in-

to help make it happen."

Worldreader's start-up costs have come largely from Risher and his co-founders, along with in-kind donations from Amazon and other businesses. Fundraising will be required to grow the lean organization, which currently operates from Seattle and Barcelona. There are plenty of unknowns, Risher admits. "We don't know the cost of e-readers in five years.



*Students with their Kindle e-readers, provided by Worldreader.org, outside a school in the village of Ayenyah, Ghana.*

clude culturally relevant titles by local authors. Worldreader is encouraging local publishers to digitize their book lists, which can then be sold online internationally. "We want to make sure they understand this is an economic opportunity for them," Risher says, emphasizing that digital book sales is not a business Worldreader wants to get into. "We want to be the catalyst

We don't know the scale we will get to. We do know that Moore's Law is on our side. The cost continues going down."

Worldreader expects to learn more from its next round of testing in Ghana. Will children read more if their reading choices are virtually unlimited? Will the novelty wear off once students get used to e-readers? From firsthand observation, Risher is encouraged. In a village in Ghana, he says, "I'd watch kids read one book, finish, then ask if they could download another. That's magical." ■