

The Amazon Kindle could dramatically improve US education

February 9, 2009 by [paulballen](#)

Filed under: [Education](#), [Gadget Watch](#), [ebooks](#)

Today, [Amazon announced the widely anticipated Kindle 2](#) with a ship date of February 24th. I immediately ordered one.

I bought my first Kindle in Dec 2007 and absolutely love it. As a frequent business traveller, I just bring my Kindle instead of packing half a dozen books with me. Usually I'll buy a book or two just as I'm boarding a plane, so I can read for hours. I save a ton of money buying books on the Kindle compared to hard or paper-backed versions. I still have about 2,000 books in my personal library, and I adore books—everything about how they feel, how I can mark them up, write notes in the back pages, etc.—I even love the smell of old books. But even though I love books I always first check to see if the book is available for Kindle, because the advantages of having books on my Kindle outweigh for me the advantages of having a physical book.

Last year I travelled in Europe, and during the trip my Kindle screen got fried. It turned completely black. The device was useless. I learned then how much I don't like travelling without a Kindle. The first thing I did after returning home was call Amazon to see if I could get a replacement.

In less than a minute I was speaking with an Amazon customer service representative. I explained the problem with the screen and he said he'd send a replacement device immediately. In fact, he overnighted it. And now, here's the kicker. As soon as I got it and registered it, all of the books I had previously purchased for my Kindle were downloaded through Amazon's Whispersnet. I lost all my notes and comments and bookmarks from all the books I had read on my Kindle, but I soon discovered that that was my own fault. There is a setting that allows Amazon to store all of your Kindle notes, comments, and bookmarks in the cloud, so that if you ever lose your Kindle or if it breaks, all of your personalized content can be re-downloaded.

Needless to say, all my personalizations are now stored in the cloud. So when I get my Kindle 2, and my library is downloaded, all of my personalizations will come with it. I'm sure in some future version, Amazon will make it possible for me to easily share (on my blog or favorite social network) passages from books, as well as my comments about them. I also anticipate that sooner or later Amazon will be able to create some social apps that utilize the aggregate bookmarks and highlights of all the Kindle readers, so they could, for example, publish the most popular quotes from any book—a virtual Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.

I really do look forward to future versions of Kindle that turn book reading into a very social experience; but I truly hope that Bezos never turns this device into a multi-purpose computing device that supports games and other applications. I think that would ruin the potential of this device.

I think that reading the right books is the best way to get a great education. To salvage the failing US education system we should do whatever it takes to get millions of kids reading great books once again. I think the best way to do that would be for states to purchase Kindles for every student (I'd say 7th-12th grade) in their education system, and to provide great age appropriate books for these students every year. Perhaps states should also carve out at least 30-60 minutes of reading time every day, in the classroom, for students to use their Kindles. Teachers could then lead stimulating discussions about what the students had read. (You'll notice that in my political philosophy, I believe that state and local governments, and parents, are responsible for educating children. The US Federal Government has no constitutional authority or role in education—even though it has been usurping such authority steadily over the past few decades. I just don't like it at all.)

My home state is Utah. I think Utah pays about \$65-70,000 for a K-12 education for each student. The cost of a Kindle with hundreds of the best books ever written in a variety of fields (with a decent percentage of them being in the public domain, and therefore free, or nearly free) would be miniscule compared to this. And yet I think it could make a difference for a lifetime for the students, who could then carry with them every great book and every textbook they had studied from, including their notes and highlights, into the workplace and beyond.

I remember when Duke University required all incoming freshman to own an iPod, so that they could listen to great books and lecture notes, etc. The problem with devices that are multi-purpose, is that the students may use them for everything but education. I bet the majority of Duke students used them for their music more than for anything else.

If the Kindle ever becomes a multi-purpose portable computing device, with downloadable games and other applications, it would in my mind destroy its potential to become the educational device of the future, which encourages and invites millions of students to read the great books—because it would be so easy for students to be distracted by everything else it offered.

I want to thank Jeff Bezos for making the Kindle a brilliant, single-purpose device to enable and encourage more reading, and I hope that he will be able to continue to produce future versions that still center on reading, even if enabling more social sharing around the reading experience. But please don't be tempted to make this a device for music, games, or fun. We already have plenty of those.