Printed books are losing out to digital resources, bringing profound change to school libraries while provoking a fierce debate over the very act of reading.

by Jeff Weinstock

turning the page

Did you hear what James Tracy did?

If you haven't, you should consider spending more time at the faculty watercooler, where Tracy has been a trending topic since last summer, when as headmaster of **Cushing Academy**, a prep school about 90 minutes west of Boston, he began to rid the campus library of virtually all of its books in favor of a digital-only collection.

It was a move that, whether intended or not (Tracy says not), has caused bookshelves to wobble all across K-12, and has challenged educators on how much 21st-century learning they're willing to tolerate. It also instantly made Tracy into a target of considerable loathing.

Judging from the response since the Cushing library went all digital, Tracy is either a monster, a showman, a technotopian, and a cold-blooded book killer ... or a pioneer, a seer, a leader, and a groundbreaker. Or he is merely as he says he is: a realist.

"I think it's very clear that the future of reading, the future of learning, is electronic-based," he says.

Believing so, Tracy retooled Cushing's library into a digital learning commons, with new furniture, interactive technologies, and small study spaces in areas where shelves once held 20,000 printed works. Most of those were snapped up by the school's department heads. By the end of summer, what's left will be donated books and some children's titles intended for kids of faculty members. Library reading is now done electronically, either via downloads from one of Cushing's web-based e-book providers or on one of the school's nearly 1-to-1 supply of electronic reading devices—Amazon Kindles and Sony Readers. Students comb through reference materials on online databases that provide them with access to countless journals that, unlike bound reference books, Tracy points out, are continually updated. "And, at the same time, they're never off the shelf," he says. "They're never being used by somebody else. They're always available.

bytesize

On Oct. 30, 2009, Boston University held "The Future of the Book," a conference that examined the impact of 21st century education on school libraries. Cushing Academy Headmaster James Tracy and Boston University humanities professor Christopher Ricks offered opposing viewpoints. Both of their speeches can be seen via this video link: *bu.edu/phpbin/buniverse/videos/view/?id=434*.

"It is inexorable," Tracy says of the move away from print, "and the proper response, since it is inexorable, is to get ahead of the curve, not insist upon a 19th century mode of learning and teaching that is doomed and increasingly irrelevant, and try to incorporate the best values of the tradition we've received into the best use of the technology we're developing."

Drawing Distinctions

Fair enough. That's a notion educators by and large have come around to themselves. Where Tracy draws their fire is with his matter-of-fact, even buoyant dismissal of bound books as being worth, one might say, no more than the paper they're printed on.

"I think that people tend to fetishize the printed book," he says, arguing that a preference for holding a book over reading a screen is strictly aesthetic, not substantive.

"Books smell differently than an e-reader," Tracy says. "The text looks different on a page than it does on an e-reader. But by the same token a horse smells differently than an automobile; it moves at a more leisurely pace; it may be more organic. But I don't know anybody, except for aesthetic purposes, riding a horse today."

Theoretical arguments aside, Tracy says that digitizing the Cushing library wasn't meant as a statement on the nature of books. "We made a key distinction between reading a work of literature in a classroom and doing research. We made no decision about the use of books in the classrooms. Our library we viewed as principally a research resource. We concluded that the online resources that are available for research are already superior for a high school student to working through stacks of books in a 20,000-volume library."

Tracy may seem less of a maverick when you find that same conclusion is being drawn at many K-12 schools, causing electronic reference sources to supplant printed versions.

"Our nonfiction is just dying on the vine," says Carolyn Foote, librarian at **Westlake High School** in Austin, TX, which opened a new library a year ago. "Anything that's not a novel is just sitting on the shelf.

"I know that what the kids want is changing. It's changed my purchasing practices completely. I'm looking at electronic sources a lot—databases, e-books. When I buy nonfiction, where I might have bought 20 reference books on gun control, now I might buy one, because they're using the online sources."

Foote subscribes to 12 different databases, including EBSCO and World Book Online, and in December she began acquiring electronic books for the library. She has bought some virtual reference books from Gale and about 30 e-books from Follett, including a bit of fiction. One title Foote made a point of buying was *Twilight*, the teen vampire novel immensely popular with students.

"I thought it was a way to entice them to try out the e-books," she says. The book itself is a virtual replica of the print version, from the cover image and the copyright date to the concluding acknowledgements page.

Her collection is small, Foote says, because she is waiting to see what the next evolution in digital books will be. "We've been sort of poised on the fence, knowing we need to take the leap, just trying to figure out which leap to take, what will work for us." She doesn't see a future for e-readers in public schools because their lack of functionality isn't conducive to a 1-to-1 distribution.

"It's too expensive for schools to buy a device that just does one thing," she says. "If we buy students laptops, they can produce a PowerPoint, they can read a book online, they can type their papers. If we buy each student a Kindle, they can read books on it, but they can't do anything else. Our school is 2,500 students, so do we buy 2,500 Kindles? If a book lives on the web, the student can use it, return it online, and then everyone has access to it. For our library it's going to make more sense to focus on the web-based rather than the device-based e-books."

Like Foote, Jana Knezek, director of library and textbook services at **Northside Independent School District** in San Antonio, has recognized the folly of putting money into hardbound reference books when

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students now do nearly all of their research online. For the new high school the district is opening in the fall, Knezek ordered Gale's entire digital reference collection.

The cost of the collection is $180,000, in addition to a nominal annual charge ($300 to $400) to maintain access to it. "Out of a million-dollar budget, we're spending almost 20 percent of it on e-books," Knezek says.

The move wasn't a cost cutter; there are no real savings to the district except for the money saved on buying shelves.

"Our rationale for doing this is it takes the holdings home 24/7 to the kids," Knezek says. When students log on, they can view the district's entire online card catalog and can search for the book they need. "Click on the URL of the book and it takes you right into it. Now, at home, the night before the assignment's due, at 10:30 p.m., the kid can use the book. Typically, it would be on the shelf in the reference collection, where they couldn't check it out."

At the elementary school level, Knezek says the district is using Follett as its e-book provider and is having LCD projectors mounted in the ceilings of every classroom to take advantage of the capabilities a web-based book offers. Teachers will be able to pull the book up on their computer and project it onto a large screen for all the students to see. "It allows you to do a lot of things instructionally," Knezek says.

They're already being done at **Graff Elementary School** in Laurel, MT, where every classroom has a Promethean interactive whiteboard, says the school's media specialist, Patti McGahan, and teachers use the device to display e-books to the entire class, highlighting and instructing on key vocabulary found in the story. From what McGahan has seen, the school's subscription to e-book publisher Sylvan Dell has increased the amount of reading students are doing in school.

"They may read close to three or four stories in one library class because of the access to the e-books," McGahan says. "It gives them almost an extra set of library books. It doesn't take the place of holding a book and reading it, but it certainly gives them another way to enjoy reading, so the quantity that they read is more."

That, at least in part, is James Tracy's argument. Transitioning to digital books, Tracy argues, didn't kill book reading at Cushing, but expanded it.

"We're awash in books," he says. "They might be digital, but there are books everywhere at Cushing, and people are reading intensely and extensively. I think people mistook printed pages for books."

A Book by Any Other Name

Did he have to go there? It's that very sentiment of Tracy's—or lack of, rather—toward print that sets off his fellow educators. At a conference held last fall at Boston University titled "The Future of the Book," Tracy, with due flourish, pushed a stack of texts off the lectern and then slid a Kindle out of his suit pocket, noting the gulf between the five books lying on the ground and the 1,000 books now held in the palm of his hand. That proved fodder for Christopher Ricks, Boston University's esteemed humanities professor, who followed Tracy to the stage and wished aloud that he had a Kindle on him so he could "throw it down on the harsh floor to show how easily it breaks."

The scorn directed at Tracy is less about his decision to move resolutely toward digital books than it is about his choice to clean out the printed ones—about seeing no intrinsic need to hold on to them. Tracy says keeping the collection got in the way of the new furnishings for the library.

"I don't think that there's anything about the book that warrants its retention as we develop much more powerful, electronic means of reading," he says.

Is the Librarian Next to Go?



IF SCHOOL LIBRARIES DON'T NEED BOOKS, then what do they need with librarians?

You can believe the question has crossed the minds of plenty of K-12 administrators, says Jana Knezek, director of library and textbook services at **Northside Independent School District** in San Antonio, TX. "By expanding the four walls to 24/7 and to the home, people can think, 'We don't need them anymore; all we need are some databases and some e-books,'" Knezek says.

The answer she believes her peers need to give is that they are needed more than ever, to help students deal with the different challenges brought by encountering so much information. Knezek offers examples: "How do I find the information? How do I access it? What's different about an online database that has authoritative resources versus somebody's web page that I could get from Google? Here's a great picture I found or a great article I found—ethically, what can I do with it? How do I cite it?"

Carolyn Foote, librarian at **Westlake High School** in Austin, TX, says she often joins a teacher in the computer lab to talk with students about doing research on a particular assignment. "I'll talk about good-quality information versus crummy websites. I'm trying to help them understand quality. The students are great online. They're able to move around, but they're still 10th-graders, so they're not evaluating what website they're on. They don't know what the biases are on the website. They don't know who produced it. They don't know even to look for that. A lot of my job is teaching them to evaluate that."

Foote does acknowledge that the internet has altered her job description in a fundamental way. "We went from information scarcity to now—it's everywhere. That changes our mission a little bit. Now we're trying to help them wade through stuff. Before, we were just trying to find enough stuff to cover what they were researching."

But Knezek believes the age-old task of the profession is unchanged. "The librarian can promote good literature whether it's e-book or not," she says. The decline of print isn't the primary threat, she adds.

"With funding being like it is, I think librarian positions are endangered with or without e-books. E-books and electronic resources probably increase that danger when the administration doesn't understand that librarians do more than check books out to kids."

That's a galling thought for a lot of educators, to see books in the traditional sense as "just words on a page," says Liz Gray, library director at **Dana Hall School**, a private girls' school in Wellesley, MA, not far from Cushing Academy. "I think a book is more than that."

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Gray, who also serves as president of the Association of Independent School Librarians, has been a notable detractor of Tracy's. "I think he is trying to be provocative—and he succeeded," she says. "Everybody knows where Cushing Academy is now."

What would happen if school administrators ever informed Gray that her library was going all digital? She says she would have a quick answer. "I'd probably say, 'See you later.' I don't really want to be in a library that doesn't have books, because I don't think it would be an effective library. I'm not a Luddite—I don't think we can only have books. But I think there's value to books."

[keyword: e-books visit thejournal.com]

Indeed, she is no Luddite. Though her library collection is still predominately print-based, Gray subscribes to about 30 online databases. She purchased two Kindles last year and expects to buy two more this summer. Students can borrow the device for two weeks, and in that time download one book.

But Gray disputes Tracy's belief that a preference for print over digital is strictly either nostalgic or aesthetic, and says her students have discovered there is a difference as well, judging by the lack of clamor for the available Kindles.

"Everybody says that they're all digital natives," she says, "but I think some of them experience that reading online doesn't [involve] the same kind of focused engagement with text and ideas that is possible with a printed book. You can't get lost in it the same way. You don't have that same sense of the book as a physical object—like, how long is it? There are no pages on the Kindle. There's a progress bar along the bottom so you can see if you're a quarter or halfway through. It's a very different feeling than having the book in your hand."

Gray says that the two formats can work together toward the library's mission. "Some purposes are better served by a printed book, and others by digital. I can't imagine my job without the digital resources that I have, but I also don't want to give up the print, because it works better in some cases."

Even Tracy accepts that print works better in some cases, which is why he keeps children's books in the library; he says research shows that print serves young kids better than digital. But he's not at all conciliatory toward those who find a precious learning experience only available in print.

"It's nonsense," he says. "I'm sure there were people who felt that when you started to have printed paper, there was a loss of the value of learning in these ugly, printed Gutenberg books compared to the smell of vellum and handwritten manuscripts. To me, the argument that you need a printed book as opposed to an electronic book to learn Plato is equally nonsensical, and even less justifiable given that we have a history of continually shifting technologies we can look back on to teach us that, in fact, these new tools are about the potential for tremendous democratization of civilization.

"We tend to romanticize, and rightly so, that mystical feeling of discovery—whatever the medium was by which we discovered it. But I think it's astonishingly myopic to suggest that it's the only way our students going forward can have that experience."

Tracy imagines that reading online will someday seem quaint compared to whatever comes next, and today's students will want to protect it. "They no doubt will wax eloquently about their web-surfing days, and how wonderful it was to make linkages in the way that they did. Every time there's a new technology, there's a change. It's a different aesthetic. We just forget about that change when it happened in the past.

"Our entire purpose was to actually try to save the library from irrelevance. To be presented as somebody who is anti-book and anti-library was completely false."

After the initial backlash, Tracy says in recent months he has found that perception beginning to turn around. "What I'm seeing is that people are saying increasingly, 'They were right. Cushing was right.' When I go to conferences to talk now, there's almost uniform enthusiasm for this as something that was prescient and that other schools now are pursuing with all deliberate speed. It's going to be ho-hum in a matter of months perhaps—certainly years. In three years out, nobody is going to think this is controversial at all. They'll be surprised to hear that it was." the

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LINKS

- **EBSCO**
  ebsco.com
- **Gale**
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