**Bookshare**

Founded in 2002 as a way to augment book offerings from Library of Congress’ National Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and from Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (Reid, 2002, p. 16), Bookshare allows readers with print disabilities to download approximately 100, 000 digitally converted book titles (Chernek, 2009, p.17) from 160 publishers (Shah, 2011) on to assistive technology devices. Publishers’ contributions of electronic versions of newly released titles along with voluntarily contributed books, and those requested by Bookshare members (Harrison, 2009, p. 39) make up its vast collection. Billed as “the world’s largest accessible online library for people with print disabilities,” Bookshare helps those with print disabilities overcome physical, intellectual, and social obstacles to accessibility (Harrison, 2009, p. 38).

Using Bookshare, those with visual impairments can download and access books in Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY**)** format or Braille Refreshable Format (BRF**)** as well as manipulate other book features using their personal software. Persons with cerebral palsy and other mobility issues who struggle with involuntary motions which make focusing on book pages difficult benefit from listening to works via Bookshare. Meanwhile, DAISY and other reading support ware help those with learning disabilities by converting text to synthetic speech, highlighting passages, and modifying paragraph and line spacing among other software functions (Bookshare, 2012). For non-students in the United States and students outside the United States, membership and access to Bookshare’s library of compressed, encrypted book files costs 25 dollars to start-up and then 50 dollars per year.

However, in 2007, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) within the Department of Education presented Bookshare with 32 million dollars to increase its offerings and to provide U.S. students with proof of qualifying disabilities use of the library without charge (Harrison, 2009, p. 38). Thanks to this grant, school district and state participation, and Bookshare’s ever-growing offerings, qualifying U.S. students’ can physically and intellectually access reading materials on a more even level to their peers.

As recently as 2009, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEA) noted that three-quarters of students with disabilities read below grade level and as little as one percent of these students had access to assistive technologies to help hone these skills (Chernek, 2009, p. 15). Without devices to make textbooks physically or intellectually accessible, students with disabilities often fell behind in classes as they waited for audiobooks to become available or for a school employee to convert a text to a usable software program (Shah, 2011). However, when school systems work with publishers and Bookshare to offer students convertible reading options, qualifying students can physically access and intellectually engage in learning alongside their able-bodied peers. For example, through the help of Bookshare and accompanying assistive technologies, Richard Flamini, Director of Special Education for Spotswood, New Jersey Schools, reported that “students’ reading and writing process has become a pleasurable learning exercise. The interaction between the text and the reader builds upon student success and contributes to advanced reading comprehension.” (Chernek, 2009, p. 18).

Moreover, the inconspicuousness nature of portable assistive technologies used with Bookshare allows students with disabilities to interact with and understand school texts without overtly showcasing their disability. In the case of Carlos Zacarias, a student at Woodrow Wilson High School in the District of Columbia who suffers from low vision, this means that he no longer needs to cart around a device the size of an overhead projector to read in his classes. Instead, he can simply use a laptop to access Bookshare’s holdings for each of his classes (Shah, 2011). Bookshare also makes it easier for educators to comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) which mandates “timely access” to accessible educational materials for students with print disabilities (Chernek, 2009, p. 16) as Bookshare will convert submitted texts to accessible files much more swiftly than the traditional audiobook method (Reid, 2002).

For both student and non-student Bookshare members, the program offers physical and intellectual access to a wealth of books and 150 magazines, newspapers, and other periodical reading materials (Harrison, 2009, p. 38). Periodicals help those with disabilities keep pace with current events and other trends referenced in national newspapers such as the New York Times, learn about job opportunities, and read previously inaccessible materials. Similarly, Bookshare’s immense library of book collections such as Newbury Award winners and New York Times Bestsellers lets members read books such as *Ella Enchanted*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Bossypants* (Bookshare, 2012) and widens their knowledge of literature and inclusion into various societal circles by eliminating barriers to these texts.

In keeping with its mission to provide “Books Without Barriers” (Bookshare, 2012), in 2008 Bookshare transformed its website to make it more accessible for all users by improving its navigation, simplifying its search options, including more features for Braille readers, and, most importantly, revising the site so that most of its features can be accessed within two to three mouse clicks (Harrison, 2009, p. 39). These changes accommodate e-book readers and other devices that read website text aloud and make the website more universally usable as a whole. Still, Bookshare strives to break down many more accessibility barriers facing those with disabilities.

Allowed under the Chafee amendment to U.S. Copyright Law, Bookshare also scans college textbooks and reading materials into its library (Harrison, 2009, p. 39) making it easier for students to access course materials. In recent years, Bookshare began scanning more books in Spanish into its library and hopes to increase these offerings over time (Harrison, 2009, p. 40). Finally, as Shah mentions in his 2011 article in *Education Week*, photographs, diagrams, charts, and other images with limited caption information often hinder textbook and printed sources’ intellectual accessibility to those with print disabilities. In order to counter this problem, Bookshare staff and volunteers plan to spend more time working on detailed oral descriptions of images within text in the coming years (2011).

The Spotswood, New Jersey School District highlights the program’s effectiveness in overcoming obstacles to print accessibility (Chernek, 2009, p.18). However, NAEA’s statistics show that the majority of students with print disabilities read below grade level and indicate that abysmal access to assistive technology resources is to blame for this knowledge gap (Chernek, 2009, p. 15). Therefore, OSEP and its parent organization the U.S. Department of Education must increase state and school district’s awareness of Bookshare services, encourage more college and university publisher partnerships with Bookshare, and ensure that qualifying students download free accessibility software from Bookshare or obtain the necessary assistive technology to use this program. Additionally, libraries and other research facilities’ programming should include informational sessions on the usefulness of Bookshare and basic Internet training courses geared at those with print disabilities. Only with increased promotion and awareness can Bookshare make its motto “Books without Barriers” a reality (Bookshare, 2012).

Works Cited

Bookshare (2012). Bookshare: How Bookshare Works. Accessed on February 11, 2012 from

<http://bookshare.org/_/aboutUs/howBookshareWorks>

Chernek, V. ( September/October 2009). Text readers make universal access to core curriculum

possible for U.S. schools; Timely for students with print disabilities. *Special Education*

*Technology Practice*, 15 – 18.

Harrison, A. (2009). Bookshare.org: Accessible texts for students with print disabilities. *JSET:*

*Journal of Special Education Technology*, 24 (2), 38 – 41.

Reid, C. (2002, March 11). Bookshare.org offers titles for blind readers. *Publishers Weekly,*

16.

Shah, N. (2011, November 1). Digital book-sharing unlocks print for students with Bookshare,

Students with disabilities get quicker access to traditional texts. *Education Week.*

Accessed on February 2, 2012 from

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/11/02/10book_ep.h31.html>