

Education by the book

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Finding appropriate learning materials for students with disabilities is an ongoing challenge for students, parents, teachers, and all education professionals. Some of the strengths of printed materials; consistency, availability and reliability, also reflect the problem with printed text: it is difficult to provide textbook accommodations for student needs in a highly diverse classroom. While there continues to be a move on a national level to support comprehensive digital file formats and digital publishing, we still have a long way to go until students, teachers, and parents have the tools to easily access all learning materials in a variety of formats.

Until accessible digital textbooks are freely available there are some technology tools that can be used to provide text accommodations. One is the talking web browser. With the Internet already in digital format, tools are available that provide text-to-speech (reading the web pages out loud) as well as magnification and text-to-audio (converting text to audio files). When a program like ReadingBar (www.readplease.com) is installed on a Windows based computer, Internet Explorer becomes a talking web browser. Students who struggle with reading now have text-to-speech dictionaries, encyclopedias, online newspapers, and online textbooks; basically any text based web page that can be read out loud by the computer.

An excellent on line resource for learning materials is Sunlink (www.sunlink.ucf.edu/). Funded by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), Sunlink provides extensive curriculum



and learning resources, as well as searchable databases of online resources and printed materials available throughout libraries in Florida. Another great resource is the Florida Electronic Library (www.flelibrary.org/index.cfm), funded through the Library Services and Technology Act. This electronic library includes online magazines, newspapers, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and maps. When used with a talking web browser, Sunlink and the Florida Electronic Library provide information in an accessible format that can be read out loud, magnified, or converted to audio.

Additional technology tools are available that can increase access to printed materials as well as digital text. The Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System (FDLRS) has worked with Sunlink for several years to provide students, parents, teachers, and media specialists information on how to provide Universal Access to learning materials. A Universal Access Tools and Strategies flyer describing screen reading software, text scanning software, writing software, and cognitive organizers can be found at the FDLRS/TECH website (www.fdlrstech.com) under "Handouts". Information on Reading Difficulties and Learning From Text by Dr. Dave Edyburn can be found at the same website under "Trainings". All of these resources provide an overview of strategies for increasing the accessibility of learning materials.

The Florida Diagnostic & Learning Resources System is funded by FLDOE and the Bureau of Exceptional Education & Student Services and provides a variety of technology services; including online resources, workshops, training, and consultations to schools throughout Florida. FDLRS Technology Specialists are familiar with text-to-speech, talking web browsers, and universal access tools and strategies. You can locate your local FDLRS Center through the FDLRS website (www.fdlrs.com). Use one of the drop-down menus to select your district or the name of your local FDLRS Center. Together we can all increase student access to appropriate learning and curriculum materials.