

# Advocate *kindles* a love of reading among schoolchildren

Mark Oppenheimer, a member of the Bridge Group at the Johannesburg Bar, and David Ansara, who works for the African Loan Market Association, recently launched an exciting new literacy project in schools. Mark spoke with **Jean Meiring** of the Johannesburg Bar about the eLibrary Project.

Friends since their student days at the University of Cape Town, like many other South Africans Mark and David realised that South Africa is facing an education crisis. The textbook debacle that has crippled schools in Limpopo and in the Eastern Cape made plain the dire problems associated with the production and distribution of traditional books.

Unlike many others for whom this is a matter of grave concern, or at least for sharp comment, Mark and David chose to do something to address the problem.

Both Mark and David feel strongly about the importance of education and believe in the power of technology to bring about positive change in society. It occurred to them that electronic reading devices or 'eReaders' might be a feasible solution to the worsening crisis.

Mark notes: 'Fiction and non-fiction books have also suffered, with disused, empty school libraries common in poor communities. Government and the education sector urgently need to explore alternatives. David and I realised that 'eReaders' might provide a sustainable long-term solution, particularly for children in disadvantaged schools.'

Accordingly, in May 2012, they set up the eLibrary Project, dedicated to literacy development in South Africa, specifically through the use of eReaders.

'Our overall objective is to get young South Africans to read more, and to fall in love with reading. The ability to read well is not only essential for passing or achieving good grades, it is a way of unleashing your imagination and enabling you to think critically about the world around you. It is our hope that this new technology will catalyse an interest in reading in young people, an interest that will stay with them and develop over the course of their entire lives.'

Using a sample of 58 Grade 11 students, on 26 July 2012, the eLibrary Project launched its pilot study at St Francis College, a small, low-fee independent school in Benoni, east of Johannesburg.

Through the generous support of donors, each of the 58 students received their own Kindle, which they will have to explore and use on a daily basis for a full year.

'There is also a strong research component to the project,' says Mark.

'Our research will evaluate the impact Kindle eBook readers have on the class of Grade 11 students at St Francis College and the pilot project will run from July 2012 to June 2013. We have started measuring students' current reading ability as well as their interest in reading before they are exposed to the devices. This will be used as a benchmark to measure the impact that the devices have on the learners' reading ability and behaviour.

'Once the pilot is complete, we will submit our research



Photo: Sarah Couch

Mark Oppenheimer in gripping mode.

outcomes to policy-makers and NGOs. We hope that our findings will assist those stakeholders in determining whether eReaders should be put to use in South African schools more widely.

'Kindles are easy-to-use devices that are designed specifically for reading. Unlike other tablet devices such as the iPad, the Kindle uses e-ink technology which makes for a much more comfortable reading experience.

'Although the Kindle has basic web-browsing ability, it's designed primarily as a reader. This means that students won't be distracted as they might be using other multi-media devices.

'Moreover, as the prices of eReaders such as the Amazon Kindle continue to come down, what was once seen as a middle-class gimmick is playing an increasingly significant role in classrooms in the developing world – including in Africa, where Ghana, Kenya and Uganda have blazed a trail.'

Mark adds: 'The essential advantage of the Kindle is that it provides learners with access to a large volume of information. It can store up to 1 400 books, has a battery life of a month, and typically costs around R1 200, which includes taxes and shipping. Many books prescribed at school level are free of copyright and Kindles may be a cost-effective way of providing students with access to great literature from around the world.'

The eLibrary Project is fortunate to be working closely with Pan MacMillan Publishers, who have kindly donated eBooks from prominent South African authors including Mandy Weiner, Eye Witness News journalist and the author of the bestseller *Killing Kebble*. The authors of *The Youngsters* series (edited by Mandy Weiner) have also donated their books. They include popular homegrown talent such as Danny K, Khaya Dlanga, Nik Rabinowitz, Anele Mdoda and Shaka Sisulu. University of the Free State vice-chancellor Professor Jonathan Jansen has also donated two titles, including his latest, *Letters to My Children*.



Photo: Sarah Couch



Photo: Sarah Couch

Reading has never been so much fun at St Francis College.

### And how has the project fared so far?

'After the students had spent about a month with the Kindles, David and I visited them to discuss their responses to the project,' Mark recounts.

'At the school we asked the students what they'd been reading. *The Youngsters* series is very popular. We were glad to see that South African literature resonates with them, yet I was most touched to hear that one of the students was reading *The Problems of Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell. He loved Russell's thought experiments and thrived on the intellectual challenge that the book presented.

'Also, one of the girls told us that she'd once viewed reading as an activity like soccer or swimming that simply was 'not her thing.' We were delighted to hear that, after spending time using her Kindle, she'd changed her mind and no longer saw reading as merely an extracurricular activity. She'd started devouring the books available on the device. What is more, to make up for the fact that she could access the Kindle only at school, she started buying books to read at home.

'The response from the staff and learners at St Francis College has been overwhelmingly positive. For a project of this nature to succeed, you need the right partners and a supportive environment. Despite scarce resources, St Francis College prides itself on its strong community focus and high academic standards, and it is the perfect partner for our pilot study.

'We recently met with the Provincial Government in the Western Cape in order to share our findings with them. The Minister of Education and his officials were very interested in the initial research we showed them and gave us some positive feedback on how to take our project forward.

'We're also hoping to run more pilots in Gauteng, provided that we can secure the support of a greater body of donors.'

One would think running a project like this is a fulltime occupation, yet Mark has been a member of the Johannesburg Bar for three years. His practice covers a range of areas, mainly commercial and public-interest litigation.

Moreover, Mark has represented newspapers threatened by defamation suits, individuals who were wrongfully arrested by the police and employees who'd been unfairly dismissed.

He is passionate about lifelong learning. Over and above lecturing law and critical reasoning on a part-time basis, he started a philosophy reading group with colleagues.

Mark's chamber in the Bridge Group reflects his eclectic range of interests. It is filled with artifacts from across the globe.

Among those is an antique document emblazoned with Queen Victoria's seal, which commemorates the appointment of a nineteenth-

century judge and is handwritten in calligraphy. Also perched against a wall are share certificates from Chinese and Brazilian railway companies dating back to the turn of the previous century.

Outside of practice, Mark is passionate about literature and film. Recently, he wrote a short film for the 48 Hour Film Project, which, as the name suggests, entails participants making a film in the span of two days. He stayed up writing the script until the small hours, and coached the actors the following morning. The next day the film was edited and ready to be screened.

And when he has the time to read a book himself, what does he read? Kurt Vonnegut, Paul Auster, Philip Roth and Nicole Krause.

Enough about me, Mark concludes.

Deftly, he redirects attention to the project: 'As a non-profit initiative, the eLibrary Project is dependent on the goodwill and generosity of others. Although capital-intensive, the initial cost of purchasing the device will be offset by long-term savings in terms of electronic books, especially if bulk orders of devices can drive down costs. Our research will also investigate the financial viability of these projects on a broader scale through a detailed cost analysis.' **A**

The **eLibrary Project** wishes to thank the following sponsors: Arcay Burson-Marsteller; Wag the Dog Publishers; Media24; Ads24; Incredible Connection; Glynis Ansara; Tony Ansara; Michele Briscoe; Clive Corder; Lisa Jeffrey; Laurence Kuper; Jos Kuper; Kate Kuper; Fred Oppenheimer; Joy Margolis; Damien Bruneau; John Whiteley; Wendy Whiteley; Kevin Williams; and Brian Wylie.

More information on the project as well as contact details are to be found on the website [www.elibraryproject.org](http://www.elibraryproject.org).