

Today's Paper » NATIONAL » KARNATAKA**i-cage for the education system**

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Apple's proprietary apps control knowledge creation, sharing

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While a satchel can hold only a few books, digital platforms can hold thousands. Students and teachers can carry and share digital books that combine text with audio and video, and allow annotations.

Schools largely use 'pre-digital' paper methods for information storing and sharing, but digital alternatives have huge advantages.

What excites educationists is the promise digital platforms hold for constructivist learning possibilities. Constructivism, emphasised in our National Curriculum Framework 2005, suggests that learning requires active participation of the learner and is not the mere consumption of information. Digital platforms and tools can support widespread construction of learning resources. Since digital resources are 'non-rivalrous', meaning sharing does not reduce their availability, teachers at a systemic level can locally create learning resources and share them across the country to create a resource-rich learning environment.

iBooks

While Amazon pioneered the Kindle e-reader, Apple recently took the lead with its iBooks app which can be freely downloaded to the iPad. This app "will integrate videos, photos and interactive graphics, make taking notes a breeze and be easy to navigate, features that will undoubtedly make Apple's textbooks more enjoyable and engaging to students than the current dead-tree versions". However, the digital world is known for its seductive offerings that lock in users and deprive them of their rights. In the case of iBooks, books can be downloaded only on the iPad. Books cannot be freely shared on other computers, smartphones, e-readers, etc. While Apple all along was supporting the Open standard for books, called ePub, the iBook uses a proprietary format, which prevents it from being read on other devices.

For teachers

Along with the iBooks app, Apple released the iBooks Author app. Teachers can create their own interactive textbooks for use in class, through "a library of pre-built interactive widgets, and you can drag in your own 3D models, keynote presentations, pictures and other assorted media, all of which gets automatically formatted before being assembled and transferred to an iPad".

While technologically this would help in easy production, the scary part is that, as per the EULA (End User Licence Agreement, which every user needs to accept to use the software), Apple will control the output. If the creator wishes to publish the book, it can only be done through Apple store after its approval.

It appears that Apple is seeking to lock the entire education system into its products, and decisions on what is available as well as what can be "creating-for-selling" are decided by it, controlling the very processes of knowledge creation and sharing. Not only is the software owned by the company, which means nobody other than Apple can modify or improve it, the output created by users would also be practically co-owned by Apple, which means it could deny permission to publish a book written using iBooks

Author. Yet, the power of imminent obsolescence in the emerging digital frontiers of the knowledge market is such that the big three textbook publishers — McGraw Hill, Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, who together make up 90 per cent of the industry in the U.S. — have tied up with Apple to provide their textbooks through iBook.

It is essential that the curriculum and teaching-learning processes here are guided by public interest and priorities and not locked into the commercial ambitions of private technology companies. However seductive the apple, biting it would lead to loss of such a potential paradise of an Open and public education system.

We need to use and develop public hardware devices and software applications (which by virtue of public ownership are freely shareable and customisable) conforming to Open standards. The Union Government recently notified the ' policy on Open standards in e-Governance' which requires that Open standards be used in Government. This would favour the current Open standard ePub and prohibit use of proprietary formats used by iBook in government schools.

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