



José Alvarez reads a Bookshare book on his iPad.

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Accessible Books Make Lifelong Learning Possible for Readers with Disabilities

BY CHRISTINE JONES

When Texas student José Alvarez was in second grade, he pretended to read. José has dyslexia and didn't want his friends to know about his learning disability. He was frustrated and sad. "It was heartbreaking for us to watch our son struggle to read," says his mother, Lola Alvarez.

This school year, José's dyslexia therapist at Frisco Independent School District introduced the Alvarez family to accessible digital books. She taught nine-year-old José and his parents how to find, download, and read these accessible ebooks on the family's tablet. The change that followed happened quickly. "We saw an immediate improvement in José's comprehension skills," notes his mother.

In San Antonio, Peter and Mary Donahue co-manage a successful business that requires them to read a great deal to remain current and competitive. Peter and Mary are blind and need easy access to a large, affordable collection of contemporary titles in specialized formats they can read, even while on the go. In 2004, they discovered just such a resource,

from which they have since accessed more than 7,500 books.

Another visually impaired San Antonio resident, 32-year-old Sweet Ramos, enjoys improving her cooking skills and learning about the environment and how to live more sustainably. Since 2005, she has downloaded more than 1,200 books in accessible formats from the same resource on which the Donahues depend.

Readers with Print Disabilities Need Accessible Materials

In classrooms and homes throughout Texas, accessible ebooks are helping these individuals and many others who face tremendous barriers of access to information, because they cannot read or process standard print materials. They include people who are blind or have visual impairments, who are affected by a physical disability that hinders reading, or who have a severe learning disability, such as dyslexia. These readers with print disabilities need materials in accessible formats, such as braille, large print, audio, or digital text.

The digital revolution and ongoing advances in technology have made it possible to get more such accessible content, in more ways, to more types of readers. This is because digital books can easily be rendered in many different ways and presented in the format that best suits one's needs. Yet, while digital materials are becoming increasingly popular in schools and libraries, it is important to remember that not all digital content is accessible.

Bookshare: Accessible ebooks for Reading Independence

The primary source of accessible ebooks for José Alvarez, the Donahues, Sweet Ramos, and many others is Bookshare, the world's largest online accessible library of copyrighted ebooks for people with print disabilities. Bookshare now serves more than 353,000 members with a collection of more than 345,000 accessible titles. It is currently the only national provider of free educational materials in all required formats to all students with qualifying print disabilities. Thanks to support from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), Bookshare is free for all qualified U.S. students and schools. People with qualifying print disabilities who are not students pay a nominal annual fee for their memberships.

The Bookshare collection includes K-12 textbooks, classroom reading books, college and university research books and textbooks, vocational and career-advancement titles, fiction and nonfiction books, and newspapers and magazines. Bookshare also provides reading technologies that enable members to experience multimodal learning and to read in the format and on the device of their choice. Depending on the device or program they use to read, members can listen to books with high quality text-to-speech voices; hear and see highlighted words on screen; read with digital braille or enlarged fonts; create hardcopy braille or

large print; or read directly in an Internet browser – in the classroom or library, at home, or on the go.

When Bookshare members need books for school, or they simply want to read the same books as their peers without disabilities, they are likely to find accessible versions of those books in Bookshare's rapidly growing collection. For Bookshare members – including José Alvarez – this timely availability of accessible books means staying on top of their schoolwork, which leads to increased self-esteem. Today, in third grade, José reads on a fifth-grade level. "Bookshare gives José reading independence," says Lola Alvarez. "He is much happier now, and a different child and learner. He is better equipped to perform well on reading tests. We believe that he will make a much better transition to middle school."

The Donahues attribute their business success in part to the abundance of books they have accessed affordably through their Bookshare memberships. As Donahue explains, "From Bookshare, we have been able to obtain many titles in accessible formats that we could not find elsewhere. If we bought these titles commercially, they would cost several times an annual Bookshare subscription." Donahue adds, "My wife and I are finally going to enter the smartphone age. I recently downloaded several titles dealing with the iPhone and its use. Bookshare's computer and programming collection run circles around anyone else's."

Similarly, Sweet Ramos exclaims, "Bookshare greatly enhances my life. I've always loved to read and learn new things. Through Bookshare, I have found books related to all of my interests. I haven't been able to find them in an accessible format anywhere else."

Bookshare is an initiative of Benetech, a Silicon Valley nonprofit that provides technology tools and services to address pressing social problems. Bookshare is made legally possible under Section 121 of the U.S. Copyright Act, also known as the Chafee Amendment. Section 121 allows authorized nonprofit entities such as Benetech to create accessible versions of copyrighted books, without the need to request permission from publishers (or pay a royalty), and then to distribute

these versions exclusively to people with qualifying disabilities.

Benetech is one of the four national organizations widely recognized as an "authorized entity" under the Section 121 exception to copyright law. Benetech works directly with the other three national organizations under formal agreements: around Section 121 eligibility with Learning Ally and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress, and on educational materials with the National Instructional Materials Access Center that is operated by the American Printing House for the Blind.

Bookshare offers two types of memberships: individual memberships, which provide the ability to access Bookshare anywhere, year round; and organizational memberships, with which members can access books that are assigned to them by their Bookshare sponsoring school or teacher. Many Bookshare students choose to have an individual membership while also being on their school's organizational membership roster.

Accessible Books for Texas: A Benetech Project

In Texas, Benetech operates an educational outreach project serving public and open enrollment charter school students who require reading accommodation. Through this Accessible Books for Texas (ABT) project, which is funded by the Texas Education Agency, Texas-based Outreach Coordinators provide free, on-the-ground training and support on Bookshare and accessible educational materials to schools and libraries serving Texas public K-12 students, as well as to the parents of these students.

Since the launch of the ABT project in April 2011, more than 1,200 public K-12 organizations in Texas have established Bookshare accounts to deliver accessible books to their students who require reading accommodations, and nearly 23,000 Texas students have been added to these accounts and can now receive the accessible educational materials they need in a timely manner.

Getting Started with Bookshare

Bookshare and the Accessible Books for Texas project ensure that people who require accessible reading accommodations have free or low-cost access to content, delivered quickly, at high quality, and with the necessary assistive technology. To learn more about Bookshare, visit <https://www.bookshare.org> and <http://www.accessiblebooks4tx.org/>. 🌟

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The screenshot shows the website for Accessible Books for Texas. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, ABOUT, SUCCESS STORIES, GET INVOLVED, TRAINING, and RESOURCES. Below the navigation is a video player showing a young boy reading. To the right of the video is a 'WHAT'S NEW' section with a link to 'Bookshare Account Getting Started'. Below the video is a section titled 'Accessible Books for Texas Forges New Pathways to Reading for Students with Print Disabilities'. This section includes a paragraph about the program's goal to provide on-the-ground training and support to K-12 students, parents, and students on accessible educational materials. It also mentions that the program is funded by the Texas Education Agency. Below this is a 'Results to Date' section with a photo of a woman and a child reading together. The text states that since the launch of the ABT outreach program in April 2011, more than 1,200 new Bookshare accounts have been established by public K-12 organizations in Texas and an additional 15,000 qualified Texas K-12 students have become Bookshare members. It also notes that the program is significantly outpacing the national average. Below this is an 'Outreach Coordinators' section with a photo of three people and a link to 'ACCESSIBLE LINK'. The text describes the coordinators as enthusiastic and dedicated individuals who provide training and support to educators. Below this is a 'Testimonials' section with a photo of a woman and a child reading together. It includes quotes from Angela Jorgensen, a parent of a child with a hearing impairment, and Roger Potts, a teacher at Fort Worth, Texas. At the bottom, there is a 'Need more success stories and check out our latest news' section with a link to 'NEW! Community Resources' and a link to 'Get Involved'.

www.accessiblebooks4tx.org/