Keeping traditional school libraries up to date is costly, with the constant need to acquire new books and to find space to store them. Yet for all that trouble, students roam the stacks less and less because they find it so much more efficient to work online. One school, Cushing Academy, made news last fall when it announced that it would give away most of its 20,000 books and transform its library into a digital center.

Do schools need to maintain traditional libraries? What are the educational consequences of having students read less on the printed page and more on the Web?
James Tracy is headmaster of Cushing Academy, a boarding and day school in Massachusetts for grades 9 to 12, with students from 28 countries and 28 states. He holds a doctorate in history from Stanford University.

Cushing Academy’s decision to create a digital format for our library collection in no way signaled the end of books at Cushing. Rather, it reflected the way students learn and conduct research today, as well as our belief that traditional libraries must be reimagined to remain vital.

Suzanne E. Thorin, the dean of libraries at Syracuse University, reached a similar conclusion when she said at the 2009 Educause Conference, “...we need to move on to a new concept of what the academic library is.” The last six months, with the explosion of e-readers and the rapid acceleration of digital technologies, have only validated for us that we are ahead of a curve that will affect every institution of learning.

A small collection of printed books no longer supports the type of research required by a 21st-century curriculum. We wanted to create a library that reflected the reality of how students do research and fostered what they do, one that went beyond stacks and stacks of underutilized books.

We, therefore, invited the chairmen of our academic departments to comb the stacks; books deemed worthy of retention were distributed to respective departments, while those not selected were donated to local nonprofits and public schools.

This freed up our beautiful library space to be used in a new way, and allowed us to rethink how a library for a 21st-century secondary school might be constituted. Some have mistakenly supposed that Cushing’s decision was intended to cut costs, but, quite the contrary, this was an investment of expanded resources to provide a new model of a learning commons at the center of an educational community.

In planning this change, our key administrators traveled around the country to look at the best examples of how dynamic learning spaces work. Our library is now the most-used space on campus, with collaborative learning areas, classrooms with smart boards, study sections, screens for data feeds from research sites, a cyber cafe, and increased reference and circulation stations for our librarians. It has become a hub where students and faculty gather, learn and explore together.

By reconceptualizing our library, our teachers and students now have better access to vast digital resources for research and learning. But they need more help from librarians to navigate these resources, so we have also increased our library staff by 25 percent.

Cushing Academy today is awash in books of all formats. Many classes continue to use printed books, while others use laptops or e-readers. It is immaterial to us whether students use print or electronic forms to read Chaucer and Shakespeare. In fact, Cushing students are checking out more books than before, making extensive use of e-readers in our library collection. Cushing’s success could inspire other schools to think about new approaches to education in this century.

Matthew G. Kirschenbaum is associate professor of English at the University of Maryland and director of the campus honors program in Digital Cultures and Creativity. He is the author of “Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination.”

Do schools need libraries and do students need books? Of course they do. There are the predictable brickbats: Not everything is digitized yet, nor soon will be. A screen is less conducive to deep concentration than the stillness of the page. Bits are brittle.

I am among those who believe that in time, and maybe soon, these arguments will seem less damning than they do now. But I’m also aware of how deeply books, and metaphors of books, have penetrated our design of digital documents and digital reading—whether we’re talking about Alan Kay’s vision of a “DynaBook” in the early 1970s, a Web “page” (with its scroll bar), or the latest tablet device to hit the market.

Books and libraries are working (or living) models of knowledge formation. We need them for the same reason we need models of atoms and airplanes. They
are hands-on. They are immersive. Holding a book in
our hands, we orient ourselves within a larger system.

Walking the stacks, following a footnote or check-
ing out what’s on the shelf above P96.T42K567 2007
is a bit like getting a glimpse at the ducts and plum-
bing behind the drywall. Or the Web site’s source code.

Books, precisely because of their (literally) bounded
limitations, teach us to ask questions that are no less
essential for the databases and deep archives of the
online world: Who wrote that? Where are the compet-
ing voices? How is it organized? By what (and whose)
terms is it indexed? Does it have pictures? Can I write
in it myself?

Even the grossest physical failings of books and
libraries, the maddening frustration of the book that is
lost or checked out just when you need it most can
instill an important lesson: knowledge is proximate. In
the digital world, that proximity is less about geo-
graphical locale than about licensing, digital rights
management, and affordability; but all the more reason
for students (and teachers) to know that not everything
is always within reach of a mouse.

Liz Gray, a former English teacher, is the library director
at Dana Hall School, a girls’ school in Wellesley,
Massachusetts. She is the president of the board of the
Association of Independent School Librarians.

Just because there’s a lot of information online does
not mean that students know how to find it, nor is the
freely available information always the best informa-
tion or the right information. One of my primary
responsibilities as a librarian is to teach information lit-
eracy skills—defining research questions, selecting and
evaluating sources, avoiding plagiarism, documenting
sources—and in my experience this works best face to
face with students.

That personal interaction is supported by the elec-
tronic availability of materials but is not replaced by it.
Besides, no online collection can replace the unique
collection of resources that I have built over a period of
years to serve the specific needs of my students, faculty
and curriculum.

My other responsibility as a school librarian is to encourage
reading, which all the research shows is crucial to student success.
Focused, engaged reading occurs
with printed books, and far less with
online material.

Unlike a Kindle or a laptop, which
may provide access to many books but
is limited to a single user, a
printed book is a relatively
inexpensive information
delivery system that is
not dependent on equip-
ment, power or bandwidth for its use.

Research also shows that the brain functions different-
ly when reading online or reading a book. The digi-
tal natives in our schools need to have the experience
of getting lost in a physical book, not only for the pure
pleasure but also as a way to develop their attention
spans, ability to concentrate, and the skill of engaging
with a complex issue or idea for an uninterrupted peri-
od of time.

Finally, we have many different kinds of learners in
our schools, and we should be using many different
kinds of tools. The two Kindles that I purchased for
my library are popular, but they have not taken the
place of books, just as audio books are not everyone’s
cup of tea.

That’s one of the beauties of libraries—we keep up
with new technologies but we also hold on to the
things that work well. Cushing Academy’s decision to
dispose of most of its library books unnecessarily
deprives that community of an irreplaceable resource.
We don’t have to choose between technology and
printed books, and we shouldn’t.

Nicholas Carr is the author of “The Big Switch:
Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google.” His new
Brains,” will be published in June.
The printed word long ago lost its position of eminence in the American library. If you go into any branch of a public or school library today, you’ll almost certainly see more people staring into Internet terminals than flipping through the pages of books.

It’s hardly a surprise, then, that some educators, librarians, and parents would begin to see books—expensive, cumbersome, distressingly low-tech—as dispensable. Once an oxymoron, the “bookless library” is becoming a reality.

But if we care about the depth of our intellectual and cultural lives, we’ll see that emptying our libraries of books is not an example of progress. It’s an example of regress.

The pages of a book shield us from the distractions that bombard us during most of our waking hours. As an informational medium, the book focuses our attention, encouraging the kind of immersion in a story or an argument that promotes deep comprehension and deep learning.

When we read from the screen of a multifunctional computing device, whether it’s a PC, a Smartphone, a Kindle, or an iPad, we sacrifice that singlemindedness. Our attention is scattered by all the distractions and interruptions that pour through our computers and digital networks. The result, a raft of psychological and neurological studies show, is cursory reading, weak comprehension and shallow learning.

We may not want to admit it, but the medium matters. When we tell ourselves that reading is the same whether done from a screen or a book, we’re kidding ourselves—and cheating our kids.

William Powers is the author of the forthcoming “Hamlet’s BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age.” The book grew out of an essay he wrote as a fellow at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.

In times of rapid technological change, there’s a natural tendency to get caught up in the moment and believe the past is being completely swept away, along with all the technologies it produced. As one of the teachers at Cushing Academy put it, “This is the start of a new era.”

This is indeed the start of a new era. Digital devices are transforming how we live in all kinds of thrilling ways, and we’ve only begun to explore their potential. But embracing these new tools doesn’t require us to simultaneously throw out all the old ones, particularly those that continue to serve useful purposes. Who says it has to be an either-or decision?

The idea that books are outdated is based on a common misconception: the belief that new technologies automatically render existing ones obsolete, as the automobile did with the buggy whip. However, this isn’t always the case. Old technologies often handily survive the introduction of new ones, and sometimes become useful in entirely new ways.

Seventy years ago, many believed the advent of television spelled the end of radio. Wrong. Likewise, the automobile didn’t kill off the passenger train. On this crowded, environmentally troubled planet, it turns out pulling up all those old rail lines was short-sighted and dumb.

So it goes with books. What are often considered the weaknesses of the old-fashioned book are in some ways its strengths. For instance, a physical book works with the body and mind in ways that more readily produce the deep-dive experience that is reading at its best. When you read on a two-dimensional screen, your mind spends a lot of energy just navigating, keeping track of where you are on the page and in the text. The tangibility of a traditional book allows the hands and fingers to take over much of the navigational burden: you feel where you are, and this frees up the mind to think.

Moreover, I believe that in a hyper-connected age, the fact that books are not connected to the electronic grid is becoming their greatest asset. They’re a space apart, a private place away from the inbox where we can go to quiet our minds and reflect. Isn’t that the state in which the best kind of learning occurs?