E-Books to Replace Textbooks?

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on April 16, 2009 Ed Tech

Skyrocketing textbook costs and the migration to all things digital are conspiring to usher in an era of digital textbooks.

The average estimated cost of books and supplies for a first-time, full-time student at a four-year public institution was $898, or 26 percent of the cost of tuition and fees, according to a 2005 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. At community colleges, the estimated cost of books and supplies was a whopping 72 percent of the cost of tuition and fees.

At the same time, people have grown accustomed to accessing information online — it's almost hard to remember a world without Facebook or Wikipedia. And today, more than 80 percent of students own laptops, according to an EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research 2008 survey based on responses from 27,313 students at 98 U.S. colleges and universities.

With the proliferation of students owning laptops and the sheer cost of traditional textbooks, it seems that digital textbooks, or e-books, would solve many problems: For students, they cost less, about half the price of a new hard copy; for faculty members, digital platforms offer an easier and more eco-friendly way to evaluate numerous textbook options; and for publishers, e-books may mitigate some of the high costs of doing business.

Why, then, are most of our books more likely print than digital? And how quickly might we expect that to change?

The format war

The lack of a common format has persistently dogged the e-book movement — a problem many electronic products have faced. In the '70s and '80s, it was VHS vs. Betamax, while Blu-ray and HD DVD fought it out more recently.

When it comes to e-books, some consider the tried-and-true PDF to be a good format, while others extol the merits of more elaborate platforms with greater functionality.

VitalSource, CaféScribe and CourseSmart are just some of the newest platforms competing in this market; and while competition generally makes for better products, each platform faces the challenge of achieving a critical mass of textbook titles. For students, the downloadable option allows them to access an e-book on a single computer even when that computer is offline, while the online format, accessible from any computer connected to the Internet, is more popular.

Racing to the frontier

Among the institutions evaluating e-books more aggressively, Northwest Missouri State University (NMSU) plans to expand an e-book pilot program that began with 200 students in the fall 2008 term. In spring 2009, 500 students from a variety of academic disciplines will use e-books exclusively for at least one of their courses. Another 3,000 will have the option of using an e-book or a traditional textbook if they are enrolled in a course using material published by McGraw-Hill, one of five publishers involved in the NMSU pilot.

Two big factors make the climate favorable for e-books at NMSU:

1. The university has an electronic campus and provides every full-time student with a laptop.
2. The campus has operated on a textbook rental basis since 1905. Students pay a textbook rental fee of $6 per credit hour, regardless of whether the texts they use are printed or electronic.

While these factors may preclude other institutions from viewing NMSU as a fair litmus test, there are certainly things to learn from the NMSU experience. For instance, a rental model where students pay the same fee for a printed or electronic book levels the playing field. With cost not being a factor, will students choose e-books over printed ones? Based on NMSU survey data, students' stated preference is divided fairly evenly between print textbooks and e-books.

Experimenting on a smaller scale

Many other institutions, such as Cornell University, are experimenting with e-books on a smaller scale. According to Margie Whiteleather, strategic projects manager at Cornell's bookstore, the university offered an e-book format for about a dozen of the 3,500 titles at Cornell.

Of the e-book titles offered, the Cornell bookstore sold 30-40 total copies in a semester — a number that's partly attributed to the lack of availability of many titles in digital format and partly due to underwhelming demand from students. Despite this low demand for e-books in PDF format, however, Cornell may test the CaféScribe platform in the future.

At San Diego State University (SDSU), more than 200 titles have been offered as e-books in each of the last two semesters, said Todd Summer, director of the campus stores division of SDSU's Aztec Shops. Those titles are also typically available as new and used printed textbooks, with some having a rental option as well.

About 6 percent of SDSU students opted for the e-book, Summer said. Those students may be motivated by the lower cost of e-books or may prefer an online learning environment, or it may be a little of both.

At De Anza College in Cupertino, Calif., for example, student Patrick Ahrens used an e-book for his Intercultural Communications Speech class.

"Digital textbooks have been, all around, easier for me to study better in my classes," he said, adding that he generally views e-books as cheaper, easy to use and well-suited to a new generation of learners accustomed to accessing information online.

Criticism for e-books

Despite many indicators of progress, not everyone is convinced that e-books in higher education are on the right track.

"Course Correction," an August 2008 report authored by Nicole Allen of The Student Public Interest Research Groups (Student PIRGs), concludes that publishers' e-books fail to meet the fundamental criteria of affordability, printing options and accessibility.

Based on a survey of 504 students from Oregon and Illinois and a review of 50 commonly assigned textbook titles, the report uses a slew of examples to make the case that the cost of popular e-books is about the same as the net cost of a new hardcopy textbook bought and sold back to a bookstore. The report also points out limitations in all 50 e-books reviewed, including a printing restriction of 10 pages at a time and an expiration date of 180 days for 75 percent of the titles reviewed.

Other e-book challenges that lurk just beneath the surface include: If students drop a class, they may be able to resell the hardcopy textbook to recoup some of the cost. With an e-book, at least in today's distribution models, there is no such option.

According to the Student PIRGs report, 75 percent of students surveyed say they would prefer a printed textbook to a digital textbook.

Keeping an open mind

What alternative does Student PIRGs recommend? Open textbooks, Allen said, are the best option. Open textbooks are generally written by instructors and offered under a Creative Commons License, which allows other instructors to use and modify the material. Open textbooks are available for free online, but so far, the lack of titles and large-scale operators have hampered market penetration.

The digital textbook market, like many emerging markets, is characterized by competing product formats, competing distribution models, some vocal proponents and critics amid what could best be described as overall tentative demand.

As a result, many practitioners on college and university campuses are trying to let the

market shake out on its own. But when it comes to education and accessing information, SDSU's Summer said, "We want to offer students as many options as possible."

Saving Trees

While most observers point to cost and accessibility as the primary drivers of e-book growth, going digital would seem to have an obvious green benefit as well. According to its Web site, CourseSmart customers have saved more than 168,000 trees by buying the company's e-books instead of printed textbooks.

"It's a nice-to-have for a lot of people," said Frank Lyman, CourseSmart's executive vice president, "but it's not the driving factor for the majority."

Textbook rental company Chegg.com proves that going digital isn't the only way to support the environment. According to Chegg.com CEO Osman Rashid, the company rents printed textbooks to hundreds of thousands of students and, through a partnership with nonprofit American Forests, plants a tree for every textbook rented.

"I am convinced every business can easily afford to help do something for the environment," Rashid said, pointing out that his company's environmental commitment motivates its employees and student customers.

Chegg.com might be a good reflection of the state of e-books in higher education. The textbook rental company hasn't ventured into e-books just yet, though its management has been paying close attention from the sidelines, and Rashid said they are evaluating options.

"Technology never drives adoption," he said. "It has to be a solution that fits the need of the user."