Are University Students Ready to Dump Their Textbooks? 
A Survey on Student Attitudes Towards E-Readers and Tablet Computers

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ABSTRACT

Today’s students are accustomed to a world where information is available on-demand, anywhere and anytime. They bring this expectation to their academic world where they want to work cooperatively and flexibly, using the modern information processing tools and access with which they are familiar. New hardware platforms such as e-Readers and tablet computers have made substantial inroads in the consumer market. E-Readers are becoming more prevalent in universities – replacing the need for physical textbooks, lecturing notes and other academic documents. Many universities are now running pilot programs, while some are already using e-Readers. Tablet computers, apart from their ability to read, edit or create various types of information documents, also offer additional features such as collaborative and social networking services. This empirical research project investigated student perspectives on the educational use of e-Readers and tablets within the University of Cape Town. A questionnaire was distributed to a significant portion of the student population and stratified according to seniority and faculty. Quantitative data was gathered and analysed on themes ranging from awareness to preferences to facilitating conditions around e-Readers within the academic environment. The students sent a clear signal: that they are keen to embrace these new technologies and the advantages they offer. E-Books can be updated automatically and downloaded to e-Readers instantly from almost anywhere in the world. Students feel they would benefit greatly through the use of e-Readers and many believe they are set to replace books completely. Having access to a portable library of information in their backpacks would benefit both students and the environment. However, there are a number of barriers to the comprehensive introduction of these technologies, including the cost of the devices; cost, rights and file format of e-books; the need for a critical mass of textbooks available in digital format and device characteristics such as battery life, and ubiquitous Wi-Fi access.

Keywords: E-Books, Educational Technology, Emerging Countries, E-Readers, Student Use of IT, Tablet Computers, Technology in Higher Education

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, a number of higher education institutions have been considering the introduction of e-Readers into their environment (Gerlich, 2011). Some have already instituted e-Reader policies and others are running e-Reader pilot programmes. Some universities have looked at providing each student with an e-Reader, while others are considering the use of e-Readers within their library (Shelburne, 2009). Universities are being encouraged to help students improve their learning capabilities both inside and outside the classroom.

In today’s fast paced world, students need educational material instantly and e-Readers have the ability to improve educational attainment in this way. E-Books can be updated instantly and universally, and there is no need to wait for the publishing process of the traditional textbook. Textbook authors and publishers can update certain sections of e-Textbooks without the need for a whole new print run. E-Readers could deliver a regularly updated, interactive education to students (Freedman, 2009).

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is Africa’s top university, ranked in the top 200 worldwide rankings, and has about 25 000 registered students, including more than 4 000 international students from 104 countries. Technology-supported education is a strong imperative at UCT and this research aimed to understand student perspectives towards the use of e-Readers and tablet computers within the University of Cape Town.

The main questions of this research were:

• Would using an e-Reader improve student studies, and enhance productivity?
• Would students find it easy to use an e-Reader?
• What features do students consider most important in an e-Reader?
• Are students planning on buying an e-Reader in the near future?
• How important are certain facilitating conditions regarding e-Reader adoption within the UCT environment?

Since e-Readers and tablet computers are an emerging information technology, relatively little academic research has been published in this area, especially from higher education institutions in emerging economies. This research aims to contribute to the relatively new field of research concerned with the adoption of e-Readers for academic purposes. It aims to provide academics and higher education institutions with a better understanding of how students feel about the adoption of e-Readers. Understanding the benefits and limitations of e-Readers, should also enable stakeholders to make better decisions with regards to the potential adoption or promotion of e-Readers.

2. E-READER AND TABLET COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES

The digital publishing revolution is changing the way we read, write, store and gather information. Digital publishing can be traced back to the formation of Project Gutenberg in 1971 by Michael Hart. He electronically published the Declaration of Independence, which became the first digitized publication. This led to the first free, online, public-domain library (Gerlich, 2011). The catalogue of Project Gutenberg grew from 1 000 e-Books in August 1997, to 11 000 in December 2003, covering several formats, (ASCII, HTML and PDF), which could easily be copied, searched, indexed, compared and manipulated. Currently (August 2013), the Project Gutenberg collection holds more than 42 000 free e-Book titles (http://www.gutenberg.org).

In 1995, Jeff Bezos decided to sell traditional books online through Amazon.com. This gave users multiple search options and the ability to view book extracts, pay by credit cards and get books delivered within a week (Lebert, 2009, p.22). When digital publishing began to attract substantial publicity in 1997, existing book distributors such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble, along with others, entered the e-Book market. Within a few years more online bookstores emerged, with some selling only e-Books (Chrystal, 2010).
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