ABSTRACT

The availability of e-textbooks is increasing along with the variety of electronic readers. According to the “2010 Horizon Report,” adoption of this technology will be widespread in academia in two to three years as it will “… reduce costs, save students from carrying pounds of textbooks and contribute to the environmental efforts…” (Johnson, Levine, Smith, & Stone, 2010, p.6). Will e-textbooks become favored by faculty in higher education? This paper will examine the benefits and limitations of e-textbooks and the attitudes of faculty and students towards using this radical alternative to the centuries-old standard of education. An exploratory case study of faculty attitudes and usages of e-textbooks at a small liberal arts university was performed.

Keywords: E-Books, E-Book Usage, E-Textbook Selection, E-Textbook Usage, E-Textbooks, Faculty, Faculty Attitudes, Faculty Preferences, Open Access, Open Courseware, Textbooks, Textbook Selection

INTRODUCTION

The growing cost of textbooks is an onerous burden for many students in the current economy (Rumsey, 2005). Students regularly voice their dismay at the high cost of required books and, at times, are unable to purchase them. Sharing textbooks and purchasing used textbooks is a common practice. College bookstores are trying to cope with their declining sales by stocking used versions and even offering rentals, especially for new texts. Book companies, faced with added costs for online resources, try to keep both faculty and students impressed with new features such as study guide web sites and clicker options for instant quizzes/polling of classes. Publishers may offer sales of chapters, loose-leaf bound editions, reduced priced e-textbooks and rentals from their own site.

Some responses to this course material challenge are emerging technologies that are predicted to become mainstream in the near future including mobile computing through cellular networks, open content with free online course material and electronic books (Johnson, et al, 2010).
Student Reactions

Students were early adapters of reduced cost books through online sites such as half.com, halfpricebooks.com for purchases and chegg.com which also offers rentals. Student organizations have been formed to protest the high costs and encourage other students and faculty to reduce this expense such as Student PIRGs (Public Interest Research Group http://www.studentpirgs.org/textbooks/?id2=14223). Their goal is for open access to free licensed online electronic textbooks - e-textbooks - with affordable printed versions (Allen, 2008).

E-Books

Electronic monographs have been exchanged between scholars since the early years of the Internet, before windows and a mouse became the norm. They evolved through UNIX, gopher, FTP (file transfer), and, finally, hypertext transfer (HTTP) protocols (Snowhill, 2001). Despite some negative reviews, e-books have several important advantages over their print counterparts. Most important is the off-campus, 24 X 7 availability of e-books. This is the single most distinct advantage e-books have over print titles.

At present, the future of the e-book is at a crossroads. Although e-book sales have steadily risen over the last five years, they have not met the expectations of publishers. According to the Association of American Publishers (AAP), e-books sales were estimated to be 123 million in 2004 and 179 million in 2005 (“E-books by the number,” 2006). Sales were far below what had been forecasted in the late 1990’s. Digitization projects by Google and other companies could have a big impact on e-book use. The Google Print Library Project is working with major libraries to digitize a large body of literature in the public domain.

More recently e-books sales have begun to take off, and to buoy the publishing industry which has seen sales fall in every other category except downloadable audio books. The most recent sales totals are more robust as e-book sales jumped 164.4% in 2010, to $441.3 million (E-book, 2011). Sales in December in 2010 rose almost exactly the same amount, 164.8%, to $49.5 million (Ibid).

E-Book Usage Studies

There is surprisingly little literature in the area of e-books and their usage. There were a few studies at the turn of the century but very little follow up in more recent years. Almost every study has looked at the usage of pre-packaged Net Library collections. One very small study from the United Kingdom found a mostly positive reaction toward e-books, however the students also believed that e-books needed to be promoted more by the library, and that there were many limitations in their academic use (Abdullah & Gibb, 2008). Studies of e-book collections from other vendors or single title purchases are almost nonexistent. Lonsdale and Armstrong (2001) looked at e-book publication in the United Kingdom. Of the 80 UK publishers identified, only 29% were publishing e-books in 1998; by 2000, this number had risen to 35%.

Another interesting feature of this study was its look at undergraduate research habits. When performing research undergraduates utilized search engines 74% of the time, the library Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) 30%, email 28%, online databases 2%, and e-journals 1% (Ibid.). The numbers for postgraduate students, while higher, were also low.

In a small study of 27 library school graduate students, Chu (2003) looked at e-book usage and preferences. One third of respondents had used e-books in the past. The two main reasons for lack of e-book use were “hard to read and browse” and “need special equipment” respondents also complained of cost, lack of title availability, and safety concerns (Ibid., p. 342). The biggest reasons for using e-books included “around the clock availability” and searchability (Ibid., p. 343). Users also liked space considerations, timely access to new titles, conservation features, and bookmarking capabilities. Chu concluded that the future for e-books was not encouraging although he did acknowledge the limitations of his non-random survey.
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