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Are The Library Shelves Empty Now That Digital Books Have *Arrived*?

Debborah Smith, Shelley Kinash and Jeffrey Brand

Imagine if it was possible for students to carry all of their textbooks with them at all times because the books weighed less than 700g in total and they fitted easily into a small bag. Then imagine that within those books, the content appears to come to life. Touch a word and it provides a definition or a translation into another language. Touch a picture and it transforms into an animation or a video. An invisible tutor is present checking the reader's knowledge of the content and providing not just immediate feedback, but also indicating which content should be studied. Do you need a new book as soon as possible? No problem, with little more than the touch of a button you can own it and be reading it. What if you do not want the whole book? That is okay too; just buy the chapter you want. This might all sound fanciful or futuristic. However, for some learners it is their contemporary reality. Electronic textbooks make all of these scenarios a reality.

An electronic book (also known as an ebook, e-book or digital book) is a text- and image-based publication in digital form, produced on, published by, and readable on computers or other digital devices. In its simplest form, it is a digitised version of a printed text, a PDF version for example, which can be read on screen or be printed out to be read. There is also what is more commonly known as the enhanced (or enriched) ebook, in which the content is presented through a variety of media: text, image, video, and audio, and there exists the possibility of interaction, for example with quizzes that give instant feedback, or other features such as dynamic visual models or maps which can be manipulated. An excellent example of this format is the ironic award-winning ode to print book series, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore* (2011) by Moonbot Studio, in which the reader can follow the words (in their choice of ten different languages), listen (or not) to the story being narrated, hear sound effects, and watch and manipulate the delightful animated illustrations. Further examples come from Touchpress, which has produced a series of enhanced ebooks in science and literature featuring videos, animations and 3D visuals that can be manipulated by the reader, for instance Solar System (2012) and Shakespeare's Sonnets (2012).

The most advanced digital textbooks use adaptive technology. Earlier this year, McGraw-Hill announced that it would be releasing the SmartBook, an etextbook which incorporates complex algorithms to continually assess students' knowledge, skill and confidence levels as they move through the book. At the beginning of each chapter, students are given an overview of the content, and they then answer a series of questions presented by the software. Based on their responses they are given recommendations for the material they should study, and their progress continues to be tracked and recommendations are made according to their progress. Rather than the student having to adapt to fit the teaching, the book adapts to meet the needs of the diverse learner.

The Horizon Report is a widely respected publication that considers the impact of emerging technologies in education and offers insight into their relevance for teaching, learning, and creative inquiry. Each year, six emerging technologies or practices that are likely to enter mainstream use are highlighted, with a likely timeframe for adoption. *The Horizon Report* first noted ebooks in 2010 and smart objects in 2009 as emerging technologies that, when combined, may change both students' and teachers' notions of reading all together. Notably, the potential for ebooks was not fully understood as the 2010 *Horizon Report* stated only that ebooks "promise to reduce costs, save students from carrying pounds of textbooks, and contribute to the environmental efforts of paper-conscious campuses". The report did not forecast the potential for enhanced learner engagement and individualised education. Similarly, smart objects such as mobile devices were identified without reference to books. Therefore, what followed were enthusiastic predictions about the introduction of digital textbooks into education. However, these predictions fell short of what appears to be evolving as adaptive, learner-centred multimedia books.

Reports now indicate that despite moderate growth in the market, the adoption of digital textbooks looks more like a quiet evolution than the revolution that was perhaps expected by some. Studies show that print remains the dominant form for textbooks in universities and schools in Australia and overseas. When there is a digital option available it is most likely offered as an alternative version to the printed book or as a complementary resource. It is counter-intuitive that when teachers provide the option of traditional bound text or ebook, the students rarely choose the digital option. What is surprising about the relatively glacial pace of etextbook adoption in schools and universities is that the reading-for-pleasure ebook market is booming and tablets and software applications for ebooks are flooding the market.

The strong majority of participants explained that they prefer to read their textbooks in the traditional printed and bound form and their leisure reading online on smartphones and tablets

Why does the preference for the traditional book continue in schools and universities? Barriers noted in research are a lack of availability of desired texts, time constraints on learning how to use a new technology, and digital rights issues which limit the type of device that can be used and also restrict book sharing. However, the most significant barrier is that when it comes to reading education materials, most people claim a preference for reading printed books. In a recent university student focus group, the strong majority of participants explained that they prefer to read their textbooks in the traditional printed and bound form and their leisure reading online on smartphones and tablets. In even the most casual of conversation about ebooks in schools and universities, one will almost always hear someone express their personal preference for the printed form – their love of books, the love of the feel, look and touch of a printed book, but also the less emotive preference for the convenience of a printed book: it is easy to flip through, highlight and annotate. People's reading habits are linked with their actual physical handling of the book or document, and these functions cannot be done in the same way with digital texts on screens.

At Bond University, a wide range of resources are used for learning and teaching. It is still common to find that most courses have a set textbook, and while digital versions are certainly making their way onto course reading lists, they are rarely prescribed as sole resources. Teachers are generally unaware of enhanced etextbooks, and those who do know about them tend to be underwhelmed by them, particularly when at the moment there is not a significant cost difference between the two formats. However, many university professors incorporate digital technologies into their teaching. For example, YouTube videos are a common resource in lectures, and forays from the classroom to websites via mobile devices are not uncommon during on-campus classes. Students complete computer-based quizzes via the Learning Management System, and use social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook as part of their learning repertoire. The use of diverse technologies aims to engage a wide range of learners more effectively. These practices reflect research showing that teachers in higher education are no longer satisfied with being the 'sage on the stage' whose role is to merely transfer knowledge to the students. Teachers are now commonly choosing to take a more learner-centred approach in which students are encouraged to create their own learning. The teachers are the 'guide on the side' coaching, motivating, challenging and modelling how to critically read and apply digital resources. Thus, it could be that as a sole course resource, the traditional textbook is no longer adequate, but there are few signs that the textbook will be abandoned – at least not before the current generation of students have completed their degrees.

There is no doubt that digital textbooks will increasingly find their way into the curriculum of a diverse range of subjects. The majority of students have devices allowing them to access digital content. The shift to the digital versions of textbooks is likely to increase if the prices begin to represent a large enough cost saving. Perhaps the greatest strength of digital textbooks is in the potential for added media and non-linear navigation that is not possible in print. These enhancements could engage learners in a way that is simply not possible using the printed form alone. This is evidenced by the level of use of digital technologies in university classrooms already. The value of sources other than print is widely acknowledged. Teachers at schools and universities are embracing innovative approaches to teaching through technology, not just in terms of content, but also in order to enhance learner engagement. The forecast for the future is that these resources will come together into a user-friendly, customisable digital platform to truly revolutionise the textbook and thereby learning and teaching. **ETS**

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Dr Jeffrey Brand is a Professor of Communication and Creative Media at Bond University. Jeff is Debborah's co-supervisor and was awarded the 2012 Bond University Post Graduate Supervisor of the year award.