E-textbooks: the Bournemouth University experience

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INTRODUCTION

E-books have been a crucial part of the Bournemouth University collection strategy for over a decade and library model e-books are our preferred method of providing suggested reading. Along with core collections and patron plans, we currently have over 194,000 e-books and these received over three million section requests in 2012–13.

Despite our strategy to purchase in 'e' whenever it is available,[1] we have always found it challenging to provide electronic access to core textbooks. Traditionally, publishers have been reluctant to make this type of material available as library model e-books: they are understandably concerned about the impact that this would have on print sales to students.

We have recently been investigating the evolving publishing models that enable institutions to provide access to e-textbooks, and this article reports on our experiences.

CourseSmart pilot

During 2012–13 we piloted providing Bournemouth University students with e-textbook rentals from CourseSmart, which was formed with the support of five major publishers in 2007 to provide academics with free instant access to e-textbooks for the purpose of evaluation.[2] CourseSmart later developed a digital rental model to satisfy student demand for e-textbooks and students can choose to rent e-access via the CourseSmart website. After becoming established in the USA, CourseSmart have recently expanded their provision internationally, and have been working with a number of UK universities to develop

institutional provision of e-textbooks (where the university pays for rental access for their students). Rentals are typically for six or twelve months and are promoted on the CourseSmart website as being 'up to 60% off compared to print textbooks'.[3] The institution purchases a rental copy for each student, so whilst access is virtually unlimited, the cost is expensive compared to other forms of library provision.

Subject Librarians at Bournemouth University worked to identify appropriate pilot studies, and students on three undergraduate courses in our Media School, School of Health and Social Care and School of Tourism were provided with CourseSmart rentals of 'core' textbooks. Our aim was to identify pilots that met the following criteria:

- the course unit ran from January 2013;
- the textbook was identified as a 'key text';
- it was available on CourseSmart;
- it was not available on library e-book platforms;
- the academic member of staff was supportive of providing access to their students.

The CourseSmart rental model involves each student having a CourseSmart user account to login to the website. Books they have access to are added to their 'bookshelf' by activating a unique access code that triggers the start of the rental period. We used a mailmerge to email the students with instructions on how to set up their CourseSmart account along with their unique access codes. During the pilot, academic and library staff were asked to report any requests for support or feedback. Students were encouraged to use their e-textbooks in a variety of ways, including: during lectures; via unit reading lists; promotion via notifications in the unit's VLE; follow-up emails and encouragement from the academic.

EVALUATION

Student engagement and feedback
We evaluated overall usage in terms of the percentage of students activating their codes and the amount of pages accessed as being low relative to the cost. We observed relatively high usage for some texts and reflect below on what this may mean in terms of achieving value from e-textbooks.

We received very little qualitative feedback from students. We expected some reaction to the email giving them their access codes but received just two responses. One was a two-word email saying 'Cool beans!' The other was a positive comment from a student union rep. Whilst we were encouraged that both were positive, it is worth considering how to ensure that students understand that it is the university library that has provided their e-textbook, especially when they are voting on question 16 of the NSS survey!

Admin and support
As well as student engagement and experience, we were keen to understand more about the staff time needed to administer and support the provision of e-textbooks. Our email instructions for students on how to register and activate their access codes included links to CourseSmart documentation. We were unsure whether there would be a need for further library support, so we also briefed frontline library staff and provided FAQs and support materials at enquiry points.

In the event, there was little demand for support and we received just one request for a lost access code and one query about browser compatibility.

The main administrative burden was managing the mailmerge of access codes and registration instructions. CourseSmart have developed a Blackboard integration module that can manage this process via the VLE. The Blackboard integration module also gives 'instructor' access to academics (free access to books on CourseSmart for evaluation purposes) and this enables them to find and 'assign' CourseSmart books to their units in the VLE[4]. This creates a link in the VLE for students to click through to CourseSmart to rent a copy of the book that the academic has assigned. We decided not to implement the Blackboard module as we were concerned about the potential for books to be recommended without the library being notified and that a link in the VLE may suggest to students that they are expected to pay for an individual CourseSmart rental irrespective of library or institutional provision of the text.

Functionality
The CourseSmart platform is well documented on their website and we will not go into great detail here. E-textbooks can be viewed online in the latest browsers and maintain fidelity with print editions. Sections of the textbook can be printed, up to a limit. Books can be viewed offline (in some browsers) by 'caching' the book, and apps have been developed for popular mobile devices.[5] Although we did not receive much student feedback regarding usability, library staff generally found the platform easy to use and we were reassured that the e-textbooks comply with acces-

sibility standards and work with screen-reading software.

Availability

CourseSmart state that 'users have access to over 90% of core higher education titles used today in as [sic] e-textbooks'.[6] Whilst we cannot comment on coverage of the e-textbook market, we found that six out of 21 textbooks (29%) that we identified as potential pilots were already available on the CourseSmart website. CourseSmart have since developed a number of agreements with publishers to increase the content available[7] and will investigate availability for titles if they are not already listed.

Conditions for achieving value

We have reflected on differences between our pilot courses to suggest (below) some factors that may affect student engagement with e-textbooks. These now form part of our discussions with academics when we are considering the value of providing an e-textbook for a particular information need.

Academic engagement

Although we were keen to involve academics, we found varying degrees of enthusiasm for promoting the texts. Recommendation of a text by an academic member of staff appears to be critical and we found the involvement of academics in the following improved student engagement:

- promoting the book in lectures;
- posting about the e-textbook in the VLE;
- linking the book with assessment (for example one academic promoted the book as being helpful for revision).

One of our criteria for future provision of e-textbooks is therefore that use is academically led, which means we need an explanation from the academic of how the text will be aligned to learning activities and assessment before we recommend a particular e-textbook.

Choice / variety of reading

We found it challenging to identify courses that make heavy use of a particular textbook as it is much more common for academics to list a number of key texts and additional reading. After analysing our pilot studies we were of the opinion that to achieve value for money from expensive e-textbooks it is necessary for students to make good use of them. We are now discussing alterna-

tive texts and access with academics before supporting e-textbook provision.

Timing and rental period

Our pilots ran during the second term, but we have realised that they may have generated more impact if they had run from the start of the academic year. This would have given us more opportunity to promote the textbooks during library inductions and introductory sessions.

We should also consider that rental provides access for a limited period (generally six or twelve months). Students deciding to rent individually should consider how long they are likely to need the text and weigh up the pros and cons of rental against print.

The timing of the rental period is important. For our pilots we worked with the academics to confirm that rentals would last for the duration of the unit and considered how to provide access for any students resubmitting or retaking the unit assessment.

Value beyond the course or unit

Whilst we focused on identifying textbooks for specific units of study, it could be argued that to achieve value from the high cost of the books we should be trying to identify texts that are of value to students across multiple units of study or levels. Essentially this is a question of academic freedom, and there is a potential conflict between providing a limited range of information in and efficient manner on the one hand and an academic's right to recommend a broad range of reading for their students on the other.

Demand and availability in other formats

Although this may sound like common sense, getting academics to agree on the best text for their course may present significant challenges.

We found that for the textbooks we investigated (21 titles), the rental price advertised on the CourseSmart website was on average around 40% of the print cost. If we compare this to print or traditional library model e-books, the one copy per student model is very expensive. Careful consideration should be given to whether demand for the textbook can be satisfied in other ways. We found that two of the titles we investigated were later released as library model e-textbooks and unless demand is expected to exceed concurrent user limits of library model e-books it is hard to justify purchasing consumable e-textbook rentals in these cases.

Conclusions and next steps

We concluded that the usage and effect on student experience did not justify the cost of continuing to provide this level of access for our pilot units. Although we are aware of institutions arranging widespread provision of e-textbooks for their cohorts, our experience suggests that a number of conditions need to be in place to achieve value from e-textbook provision and we are now careful to discuss those conditions with academics before recommending e-textbook provision.

One of the additional benefits of piloting e-textbooks was that Library and Learning Support are now recognised by the institution as having expertise in this area. As a result we have been approached on a number of occasions by academics investigating e-textbook provision after they have been contacted directly by publishers' sales representatives.

Where our criteria for achieving value are not met, we have been able to recommend alternative forms of provision. In two cases this year, we have been able to support the provision of e-textbooks direct from publishers (McGraw-Hill and Cengage). In both of these cases, the academic is using the publishers' learning platforms (Connect and Aplia) to build learning activities and assessment in the VLE and we believed that this would ensure student engagement with the accompanying e-textbooks.

Early indications are that close to 100% of the students on these courses have activated their access to the e-textbooks and we shall soon be conducting a more in-depth evaluation of the value that self-assessment and learning activities available on the learning platform add, particularly with regard to academics supporting larger cohorts and student motivation to read the text.
More generally, we believe that university libraries should take a coordinated approach to working with providers of e-textbooks to ensure that business models and pricing are fair to both publishers and universities. We welcome further discussion and would love to hear the experiences of other institutions providing e-textbooks to their students.

Notes

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7. J. Farrington, 'CourseSmart numbers expand', The bookseller, 28 June 2013, Available from: http://www.thebookseller.com/news/coursesmart-numbers-expand.html [accessed 5 December 2013]