

2015

Home Grown Ebooks: North Carolina's Collaborative Ebook Pilot Project

Jill Morris
NC LIVE, jill@nclive.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship>



Part of the [Information Literacy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morris, Jill (2015) "Home Grown Ebooks: North Carolina's Collaborative Ebook Pilot Project," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol7/iss1/5>

This From the Field is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collaborative Librarianship by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Home Grown Ebooks: North Carolina's Collaborative Ebook Pilot Project

Jill Morris (jill@nclive.org)
NC LIVE

Abstract

This article describes how NC LIVE, a large, statewide, multi-type library consortium piloted new models for funding and purchasing a shared ebook collection that concentrated on books published by local publishers. Although the pilot is still being evaluated, the consortium counts the project as a success in that 200 libraries statewide gained unlimited simultaneous user access to more than 1,200 titles not previously available in libraries. NC LIVE is now working with publishers and a platform provider to move the ebook pilot into its next phase as a full-fledged ebook program. The aim of this article is to describe the process used, major decision points, and the challenges and opportunities NC LIVE experienced throughout the development of its Home Grown Ebook Collection in hopes that others interested in similar models might benefit.

Keywords: Ebooks; Funding models; Publisher relations; Library consortia; Collaboration

Introduction

For years, NC LIVE, a large, statewide, multi-type library consortium with 200 public and academic member libraries, has called for increased access to ebooks, but there was a great deal of uncertainty about what kind of ebook project would gain the support of the consortium. Typical models offered by aggregators and ebook vendors provided a number of ebook challenges, such as limited simultaneous user access, expensive platform fees or subscriptions, and title lists that were uninspiring. All of these challenges were magnified by the consortium's diverse group-based access. After learning more about ebook models used by other libraries, such as those implemented in Douglas County Libraries (Colorado) and the CALIFA consortium (California), and after experimenting with a number of different approaches, the NC LIVE staff undertook its own ebook project with specific North Carolina-based requirements. In 2014, NC LIVE kicked off the "Home Grown" ebook pilot project that would test the collaborative ebook waters in new ways. The result was a group-funded collection of ebooks published by

North Carolina publishers and purchased in perpetuity with unlimited use rights for the duration of the pilot. More than 1,200 ebooks were made available via the BiblioBoard platform and are now available to all North Carolinians.

Context

NC LIVE is an "all-in" consortium whereby all purchases and licensed content are funded centrally and made equally available to all member libraries. Because of this widespread resource sharing across public libraries, community colleges, and public and private universities, NC LIVE's focus is extremely narrow, limited to the intersecting resource needs of its constituent groups. NC LIVE works closely with its Resources Advisory Committee to identify areas of shared need, as well as possible opportunities for new content and formats.

Prior to embarking on the Home Grown ebook pilot project, NC LIVE staff spent approximately six months outlining a number of different models and methods by which the consortium might build its own ebook collection. Ideas ranged from building a locally hosted ebook



platform using Adobe Content Server (similar to the operation in Douglas County Libraries), to working with a large aggregator to host content purchased by NC LIVE through local publishers. In its quest to determine the right ebook approach for North Carolina, consortium staff purchased a small collection of ebook titles using Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds from the State Library of North Carolina and bought from local publisher, John F. Blair. These titles were purchased in perpetuity and had limitations in terms of the number of simultaneous user accesses (copies available). The John F. Blair collection of ebooks purchased by NC LIVE served as the consortium's ebook test case as staff developed several different proofs of concept for accessing those ebooks.

In testing options for housing the John F. Blair collection, NC LIVE staff discovered certain problems when implementing a system that limited the number of simultaneous user accesses. Creating a system that allowed users to put a book on hold would take more development work than originally planned while, at the same time, systems that lacked the holds "feature" altogether seemed unintuitive and problematic for library patrons. Looking at other traditional ebook models, and even many of the new models piloted by other libraries, NC LIVE noticed that these programs still suffered from libraries' limited ability to offer ebooks to anyone who wanted to read them. These challenges encountered during NC LIVE's exploratory phase drove home the importance of developing an ebook approach that would be welcomed by patrons and result in a good library experience – one in which books were available on-demand. This experience, along with NC LIVE's approach to fulfilling shared digital content needs across diverse library types, worked to steer the development of the pilot requirements outlined in the next section.

Pilot Project Objectives

To successfully launch an ebook project that would serve the needs of the NC LIVE consortium, NC LIVE staff developed a set of criteria that matched the feedback offered by advisory committees and dealt with the challenges encountered during the exploratory phase of the project and addressed the restraints of budget and resources. From the outset, the high-level goal of the pilot project was to provide North Carolina libraries with unlimited simultaneous user access to 1,000 fiction and non-fiction ebook titles from North Carolina publishers. Although the quantity of ebook titles was chosen somewhat arbitrarily, the idea was to create a collection that had enough titles to draw interest and to be considered a substantial ebook collection gain for libraries. The decision to focus on North Carolina publishers came from a desire to purchase books that were produced locally, where publisher relations and partnerships could be grown and maintained more easily, and where content would be of interest to all libraries involved. In addition to purchasing titles from local publishers, NC LIVE aimed to determine and develop the proper ebook circulation system for these items, and produce a report with recommendations for future steps.

Specific project deliverables outlined by consortium staff included the following:

- 1) Contracts for perpetual ownership of content and unlimited usage during the pilot;
- 2) Ebook content (digital files in formats to be determined) and accompanying metadata;
- 3) Access that may be made available via read.nclive.org site;
- 4) A platform that enables the ingest and check-out of content to authenticated users;



- 5) An interface that allows patrons to search, browse, and download or view online ebooks on computers, tablets, and other mobile devices;
- 6) Funding provided directly from libraries to purchase content;
- 7) MARC records to distribute to local libraries;
- 8) Integration into the NC LIVE website as a new resource;
- 9) Statistical reports that illustrate the use of each book per library;
- 10) A report that provides recommendations regarding administrative and technical aspects of the project, including what changes to make in the service, how to pay for it going forward, how to proceed with licensing unlimited usage after the pilot project ends, and how much staff time and technical support would be needed to continue the service.

Making It Happen

The pilot had several major phases and the work was divided up among three project teams: an administrative team, a communication team and a technical team, each comprised of NC LIVE staff. The first phase of the project involved obtaining the content and securing a platform on which to provide access to the ebooks. As previously mentioned, while still in the exploratory phase of this project, NC LIVE experimented with its own instance of Adobe Content Server as an alternative to hosting content on one of the major ebook vendor platforms. However, the on-going maintenance and development costs that came with building and hosting the consortium's own interface were significant, so NC LIVE continued to seek other options. During this phase, NC LIVE staff learned of the Bibli-

oBoard platform provided by BiblioLabs that fit well within the project budget and offered all of the platform features necessary to meet project requirements. After testing and much communication between NC LIVE and BiblioLabs' technical staff, it was determined that the BiblioBoard platform would allow NC LIVE to test the funding and ebook purchasing models desired.

Simultaneously, the work of procuring 1,000 ebooks from local publishers was no small task, made more difficult by the requirement that all access to ebooks be unlimited during the pilot phase on a platform yet to be determined. Consortium staff spent approximately six months leading up to and during the pilot developing relationships with a number of North Carolina-based publishers, including Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill (an imprint of Workman Books), Crossroad Press, Gryphon House, Ingalls Publishing Group, John F. Blair Publishing, McFarland, Press 53, and UNC Press. All these publishers participated in the project.

To build new relationships with publishers, NC LIVE staff met with individuals from each publishing group multiple times, in-person, by phone and via email. After agreements had been reached that would allow NC LIVE unlimited simultaneous user access during the period of the pilot (July through December 2014), the work of selecting the titles could be done.

After selecting the platform and securing access to content, NC LIVE worked with the Resources Advisory Committee to put together a working group that would hand-select the titles included in this collection. The goal was to put member library staff in control of content selection that would also ensure greater participation in the process of developing a truly "home grown" collection which would appeal broadly to North Carolina libraries. Once content was selected,

NC LIVE's technical team spent several weeks inventorying the ebook titles, ingesting them into the BiblioBoard platform, and testing to ensure access worked as intended.

In the next phase of the pilot, NC LIVE tested its funding model by asking each member library to pledge at least \$250 to help fund the ebook collection. In return, NC LIVE would contribute by providing access to the BiblioBoard platform on behalf of all member libraries. Communications were distributed via NC LIVE email lists, and NC LIVE staff met with library directors and collection development librarians at statewide meetings. Library directors expressed strong support for the project's goals very early on this process, indicating that they would pledge, and the directors made good on that promise with more than 90 percent of member libraries pledging at least the requested amount. On average, approximately \$340.00 was pledged per library. The NC LIVE Foundation, a non-profit developed to support the work of NC LIVE, collected the funds and paid the publishers for the content purchased.

In August 2014, the BiblioBoard platform was officially launched providing access to 1,221 ebooks secured from the eight participating publishers. There were very limited technical difficulties that included some formatting issues of .epub file formats, many of which were resolved within the first week of launch. NC LIVE staff assisted member libraries in limited promotional efforts during the pilot phase of the project that included offering spotlight blog posts that highlighted specific titles, providing downloadable web graphics, and providing libraries with MARC records for the collection. Though NC LIVE staff wanted libraries to begin fully integrating the ebooks in local systems and using the ebook collection with patrons, they did not launch a full-scale marketing campaign. NC LIVE staff recognized the amount of time libraries would need to invest in this process but were concerned that library staff not spend an inordi-

nate amount of time and effort on a project that had not yet been tested. NC LIVE determined that promotional efforts would become a higher priority for the consortium after the project's pilot phase was complete and future plans for the Home Grown Collection were firm.

After the platform launched, NC LIVE entered into an assessment phase in which it reviewed usage data, considered the success of funding and licensing models, and began to consider recommendations for how to take the program forward into the future. BiblioLabs provided usage data that indicated ebooks had been used approximately 1,500 times by all libraries between August and October 2014.¹ In addition, the administrative team met with publishers to look at usage trends, to consider the number of times of each title had simultaneous use, and determine fair compensation for publishers going forward in order to continue unlimited simultaneous use access.

Outcomes: Successes and Challenges

The development of local publisher relationships was by far one of the biggest challenges, but proved to be one of the greatest successes enjoyed in the project. NC LIVE, libraries, and publishers all found positive outcomes in exposing library patrons to new titles and bringing new ebooks to the library marketplace. Controlling negotiations locally rather than relying on a major vendor or aggregator was time consuming for consortium staff, but this was rewarding as it made it possible to work with small publishers that, for a variety of reasons, many major aggregators would never work with. Additionally, the geographic focus of the project contributed to a feeling of shared success within the state for all parties involved. Many publishers also suggested that they could help put libraries in touch with their authors in order to hold library events that would promote their ebooks and thus, hopefully, sell more copies.

Though many publishers were enthusiastic, this project highlighted the need for a strong champion who could rally publishers to make their books available to library patrons statewide. For the most part, NC LIVE specifically targeted only local publishers who were not currently selling their books in electronic format to libraries, a move allowing for publishers to gain additional sales and providing libraries opportunities to gain new content. Although all publishers appreciated the project's objectives, some agreed with its compensation models more strongly than others, and it was important to address in negotiations such long-standing publisher fears surrounding loss of sales due to library access. The diversity of opinions and goals among publishers required NC LIVE to be flexible as it approached different models of compensation.

The most challenging point of some of the negotiations was the project's goal for unlimited simultaneous user access that allows a book to be read by any library patron at any time on any device. Although this was a point of discussion with some publishers, with many it was an opportunity to gain better exposure in the library marketplace, to introduce readers to their books, and to help their authors to become more well-known. NC LIVE successfully negotiated deals to purchase content from the eight publishers included in the pilot phase of this project although a fairly substantial time commitment was necessary on behalf of consortium staff to build those initial relationships.

Having purchasing models in place and working well, the resources needed for publisher relationships may lessen over time, but NC LIVE staff determined that it may also be worthwhile to consider whether there may be other alternatives such as vendors or aggregators that share NC LIVE's Home Grown ebook philosophy and that could help supplement the work needed in this process. A multi-pronged approach may provide publishers with access to an even wider distribution channel for library sales. This may

be appropriate in some cases but will always need to be balanced with the benefits that come from negotiating deals in-house.

In addition to considering publisher relations, NC LIVE staff also evaluated the project based on the number of ebooks used and the funding libraries provided. Judging by usage statistics alone, NC LIVE staff believed the pilot project was a success. Even without heavy promotion and integration of the content into library catalogs, the collection saw usage spread across all publishers, as well as across all library types and sizes. But when it came to measuring the success of this project overall, NC LIVE staff knew it was only as successful as member libraries believed it to be, especially since member libraries contributed with funding. NC LIVE staff believed they had achieved their stated objectives in delivering an unlimited simultaneous user access to the Home Grown Collection of ebooks for North Carolina libraries, but additional feedback was needed to better understand member library staff perceptions of the project.

To gather this feedback, NC LIVE administered an online survey in October 2014 to library staff via NC LIVE email lists. When asked about the future of the Home Grown ebook collection, more than 80 percent of library staff recommended that the ebook collection continue and to grow. Those respondents who said that they were unsure about whether to expand or continue the program a small minority (approximately 18 percent of 112) stated that they needed to see usage data before they could make a decision. Although usage data was available to NC LIVE staff at the consortium level, it had not been made available to individual libraries unless requested directly by a library staff member. The survey comments made it clear to NC LIVE staff that member libraries valued usage data for decision-making purposes, and in future projects more emphasis will be placed on distributing this information to libraries earlier in the process.



Additionally, NC LIVE member libraries responded positively when asked whether they believed the Home Grown ebook collection was a good value with more than 93 percent believing it was a fair value or better, and 72 percent responding that they believed it was either a good or excellent value for the cost to their library. More than 78 percent of respondents said they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the titles included. Overall, the survey responses indicate that member library staff believe NC LIVE should continue to move forward with the Home Grown ebook collection as a program, and in a recent meeting of NC LIVE's Librarians Council, the consortium's governing board determined that it would support the continuation of this effort. In future phases, NC LIVE will look to expand the content available from current publishers, build relationships with new local publishers, and negotiate deals for unlimited simultaneous use of ebooks going forward.

Conclusion

NC LIVE staff believe the Home Grown ebook collection is a model that could be used by other groups of libraries hoping to bring new ebooks to the library market. While not a small undertaking, the project was manageable within a one-year period and with widespread support from consortium membership and a strong project champion. The project was true to its name, with homegrown ideas and support garnered from all involved. Its local focus gave the ebook pilot a unique spin that was interesting to North Carolina libraries across all library types. The funding models used by NC LIVE may not work in all situations, but in North Carolina member libraries were able to contribute a very small amount of funds for a substantial gain in ebook content. NC LIVE staff hope that by sharing the work completed in North Carolina, other groups of libraries may also be inspired to seek out content produced locally in order to expand patron access to ebooks.

Endnote

- ¹ A "use" was counted each time a user accessed an ebook within the collection and advanced beyond the cover art page. Usage that stemmed from NC LIVE staff testing the platform was removed from this total count.