

How do students access the resources they need? Survey finds only one in five obtain all resources legally.

Laura Czerniewicz presents an overview of findings from a study on the practices of university students accessing learning resources at a research-intensive university in South Africa. There is a grey zone in the access of resources that is now simply part of normal life in a new communication and information order. The students' perspectives raise critical issues for new models of publishing, for digital literacies and for open scholarship.



Academic textbooks are **expensive** and the cost of textbooks globally has continued **to rise** alarmingly even as other educational resources have become relatively cheaper. For students, **open educational resources** should make more sense – certainly financially. But, globally, the uptake of such resources **is low**. There are not nearly enough relevant local open-source textbooks in countries like South Africa, where I work at a university. Where they do exist, academics and students barely know about them.

So how do students access the resources they need? We investigated this as part of a larger research project across six countries: Argentina, Brazil, India, Poland, South Africa and the US. How do students access resources like books? Do they consider copyright and what do they think about it? Do they pirate learning materials? How do they make sense of what they do?

This study concentrated on students at one of South Africa's top research-intensive universities. We compiled a survey that was answered by 1,001 students and conducted six focus groups with students across three professional disciplines. These disciplines were chosen because students were likely to be prescribed textbooks.

What we found

Here are a few key findings from the survey:

- students are accessing learning resources in both print and digital forms – it's not a case of "either/or";
- they are accessing these resources both legally and illegally without necessarily knowing the difference. Many gave contradictory answers when asked what percentage of their resources were downloaded legally and illegally; and
- notably, only a fifth of students said that all their resources were legally obtained. The comment "we all pirate" was made several times.

It also emerged that accessing learning resources through a variety of sites requires a certain measure of expertise. Students admire their peers who know where to ferret out such resources, and such knowledge is unevenly spread. In this sense the notion of a homogenous student body whose members are all natural "**digital natives**" is challenged.

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- Laura Czerniewicz

Principled pragmatism

Another interesting part of the study was what it revealed about students' attitudes to their own practices and actions. Many made a joke of their piracy or distanced themselves in an amused fashion by shifting responsibility to others or to the technology itself. For instance, some joked:

| *It's Google's fault.*

They also displayed a matter-of-fact pragmatism. For many, it is a matter of principle, with one saying: "Is it unethical to want to be educated or is it unethical to charge so much [for textbooks]?"

Others believe that they are doing the right thing: "... even though in my head I know it's wrong, it's just a technical thing. Substantively speaking, it's the right thing to do," one explained. Another said: "I am not worried about the consequences of illegal downloading. [I'm] worried about graduating."

The respondents also made a distinction between downloading textbooks and other media forms, particularly music and books. They consider the educational aspect central and feel the pursuit of education justifies their actions. As one said: "It's about access to education: it is huge! It's the future of our country."

An important distinction was also made between plagiarism and copyright. Plagiarism was considered unethical and risky, while copyright appeared to be less of an issue. Said one student: "Copyright – it does not even seem like an issue any more ... I copy everything ... But it almost seems like it isn't copyrighted, it almost seems like it's free for everyone."

There was also a glimmer of an alternative perspective. Some students acknowledged the [existence](#) and value of open, free content, but did not know where to access it. They also said more of it is needed.

“Is it unethical to want to be educated
or is it unethical to charge so much [for
textbooks]?” – student respondent

A grey zone

These quotes are just a taster. The students' voices are articulate on matters of principle, plagiarism, piracy and access to textbooks and other academic resources. They raise critical issues for new models of publishing, for digital literacies and for open scholarship.

Through the literature review and the findings of this study, it is clear that there is a grey zone in the access of learning and academic resources that is now simply part of normal life in a new communication and information order.

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