

Mobile Access in the Library: Some New Developments in Ireland

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1 Introduction

New insights provided by a range of specialists in the areas of social science, cognitive research and computer science research have led to increased developments and advances in the architectures for interactive and mobile learning environments. The most exciting results indicate that mobile technologies can be used to revolutionize learning and provided discontinuous rather than incremental learning opportunities in libraries and campuses worldwide.

Mobile learning corroborates the view of educational philosophers such as Dewey and McLuhan that there is an intrinsic connection between communication, information provision and the learner community. Nevertheless, despite the rapid and continuing adoption of mobile devices, there has, to date, been little activity in integrating these technologies into the realm of mobile learning and the learning and library/information environments.

A paradigm shift is occurring in the access people have to educational materials due to the ubiquitous availability of these materials brought about by the mobility and pervasiveness factors, which are inherent to mobile technologies. The potential for mobile technologies in education is enormous and the challenge for the e-learning community is to harness these devices for the benefit of education. One such benefit is the ever-increasing availability of educational content such as e-books on mobile devices. The availability of e-books will greatly support mobile access in the library.

2 Irish University Libraries and e-Books

In summer 2001 the Irish academic libraries established a Working Group to assess the development of e-book technology in Ireland and to examine the potential of this medium for the library sector. The Group, which included representatives from seven Irish University libraries, was invited to make a range of recommendations regarding the collaborative purchasing and implementation of e-book technology, recommendations which were subsequently published in two reports produced in June 2003 and June 2004.

Research undertaken at the beginning of this project (2001-02) showed e-book technology and e-book markets to be a state of flux. Uptake of e-books by libraries was inhibited by poor on-screen presentation and a limited availability of titles. Licensing models necessary to access e-book collections were highly varied and seemed more concerned with protecting the interests of the publisher than supporting collaborative library purchase.

The Working Group members found however that e-books could support learning activities in certain subject areas where information was structured in relatively discrete blocks and where the currency of the material was paramount e.g. subject areas like business, law and computer science. The group initiated a one-year pilot-project where participating institutions signed up to the Safari Technical Books database on a collaborative basis to learn more about the realities of e-books for libraries and users. The Safari e-books database focuses on the subject areas of business and computing and it was felt that it was the best choice given that these two subject areas are closely linked and all have strong teaching programmes in all Irish third-level institutions. A year of detailed evaluation of the workings of this e-book service by library staff, academic staff and students ensued with a particular focus on issues such as public access, licensing and cost-effectiveness, and its potential for teaching and learning.

The project yielded very encouraging results regarding the future viability of e-books as a medium that is increasingly being integrated with more traditional library and information resource-delivery methods. This area is changing very rapidly and there remains much to learn about the uptake and viability of e-books in a wider range of disciplines. While e-books initially evolved quicker in areas such as business and computing, recent developments show that they have extremely quick in-roads into more “traditional” subjects such as Humanities. As an example of this it is necessary only to note the recent popularity of e-books databases such as collections of early printed books like *Early English Books Online (EEBO)* and *Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)* and reference collections like the *Oxford Reference Online*, the *Gale Virtual Reference Library* and *xreferplus*.

The advantages and disadvantages of e-books as viewed in the context of the University of Limerick's implementation of the one-year pilot Safari project could be summarised briefly as follows:

2.1 Advantages

- Ideal for short Quick Reference enquiries.
- Very appropriate for printing off particular sections.
- Has the advantage over a printed book that it highlights key areas and words as part of the search results.
- The fact that new e-book titles can regularly be swapped for “old” titles within the e-books database is advantageous in comparison with printed works, which can date quickly.
- No necessity to “weed” material to the same extent that is necessary with printed material.
- The e-books database includes helpful links (e.g. regarding subject searching, related topics/links etc.) which are not as strong a feature in the “traditional” library access model.

2.2 Disadvantages

- Reading a book onscreen is unattractive when compared to the printed book and can be tiring on the eyes. Pages can be relatively short when read onscreen and users can find the frequent necessity to press the “Next” button to get onto the next page irritating.
- The search facilities available in current e-book products are still relatively basic and need to be increasingly sophisticated for e-books to achieve their full potential.
- There is still a great need for e-books packages to have increased potential for integration with other systems and online services.
- The necessity to liaise with a service representative or helpdesk, which is at a distance or in a different country regarding technical issues is not ideal.
- The library awareness on the part of e-books providers includes the necessity on their part to make licensing issues more “user-friendly” for libraries who wish to subscribe to particular e-book products as there continues to be undue complexity in relation to the licensing of e-books products generally.