

New Texts in Old Pedagogies; Use of Electronic Books by Undergraduates

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Abstract

University libraries expect students to access growing collections of electronic books (e-books) and other electronic resources. End-user research is important to discover how these resources are actually being used, but it is in short supply. This report investigates the levels of and reasons for acceptance of e-books by a small cohort of regional nursing undergraduates. Students were surveyed with questionnaires in the first and final semesters of their degree. Interviews in the final year elicited more details of their attitudes towards and use of e-books. Use is not yet commonplace. One of the major barriers to uptake was that no e-books were recommended by academic staff -- who are following traditional pedagogies. To increase usage, students need to be reminded about how to access e-books and of their unique convenience. Academics need to be encouraged to embed e-books as standard resources within an innovative curriculum.

A faltering start.

While we may not yet be taking an electronic book to bed to read the latest bestseller, university students are increasingly being offered e-books by their libraries as essential study resources. Promoted by publishers, e-books are being purchased in larger quantities by university libraries to augment print collections. The cost-effectiveness of electronic books and their improving usability are seen by librarians to have significant advantages when faced with the need to provide information resources to large cohorts of distributed undergraduates. Students may not be so keen. The thesis of this paper is that the full potential of e-books as a study tool for undergraduate students is yet to be realised.

This research report reviews recently published literature that explores levels of acceptance of e-books by undergraduate students. An e-book is the digital equivalent of a conventional printed book, and in fact usually closely resembles the layout and structure of a printed book. An e-book is read on a personal computer (PC), or dedicated hardware device called an e-book reader, or mobile phone. In this study students used their laptops for e-books.

Using methods of evidence-based librarianship, a small cohort of nursing students at a regional university campus was surveyed as a pilot study. Beginning in their first year with the librarian introducing e-books as a potential resource, the study continued to follow up these students in their third, final year. Finding that the uptake of e-books by this group of students had not yet reached general acceptance level, the barriers for not using e-books were examined. In this paper discussion centres on how e-books could be promoted to achieve greater acceptance by students. The conclusion is reached that e-books will require promotion to academics before students will readily seek them out.

Catching a wave.

In 2007, 50% of Monash University's library acquisitions were electronic resources rather than print (Monash, 2008). Within this expenditure some 55,000 e-books were purchased (D. Runner, manager, e-resources, Monash Libraries, personal e-mail 19.09.08). This brought the total of e-titles available to over 300,000. La Trobe University library has a similar pattern of acquisition. After years of development and high expectations, the e-book publishing industry is providing purchasing models to libraries that allow access to both datasets of e-books and single titles. Selection of e-titles alongside print titles is now a routine procedure for acquisition librarians. La Trobe University purchases e-books from NetLibrary, MyiLibrary, James Bennett and Springer. None of these vendors require special readers for their products; text can be viewed online through either html or pdf formats.

Where a print title can only be borrowed by one student at a time for a loan period of some weeks, one of the clear advantages of e-books for librarians is that they allow access for short time periods by large numbers of students. This results in a very good cost per use ratio. In 2009, La Trobe University will introduce a common first year for Health Sciences. Subjects will have up to 1,700 enrolments over five

campuses. Lists of readings are being prepared by academics with librarian encouragement of e-book selections to complement the print titles. There is some reluctance on the part of academics to recommend these resources (La Trobe, 2008).

They still perceive e-books as awkward and do not appreciate the benefits. The same applies to students, who now confront e-books in the way that they arrived at electronic journals and searching in databases for full text articles some years ago. What raw statistics of use do not show is how the experience of e-books is perceived by the student. They do not show if information is found by downloading or searching within a title (Booth and Brice, 2004). In this paper the centrality of the user perspective is investigated both through quantitative and qualitative research.

Current research shows limited use.

As preliminary research, library and information science databases were examined for publications about undergraduate usage of e-books. Electronic textbook trials were deliberately excluded as these tended to provide a particular group of students with a publisher-promoted text (Simon, 2001; Kropma, Schoch and Teoh, 2004; Mercieca, 2004). Although relevant to how students make use of e-books, they do not provide any insights into how students look for e-books within the learning context.

Together the identified studies show that the proportion of student use of e-books varies from 22% of a given student population to 51%, with an average at 39%. 'Use' will be described later in this paper.

Nursing students favour professional networks and journals

There were very few studies specifically about nursing students. Perhaps more than some other disciplines, health science subjects emphasise evidence-based best practices, systematic reviews, patient scenarios, legislation and ethics, all of which require a student to locate current literature. Assignment tasks specifically discourage the use of any resources which are older than ten years. Comprehensive textbooks of the latest edition are standard prescribed reading, under the current pedagogical regimen. The advent of electronic books has not yet been studied to find how students compare them with traditional sources of information.

Dee and Stanley's (2005) study of 50 nurses and 25 students, all of whom worked in health care facilities, found that the preferred information source for this group was actually human resources, i.e., professional superiors, clinical supervisors, nurse colleagues, physicians, or other health care providers, because they believed 'this was the fastest way to obtain reliable and concise information' (p.216). Dee and Stanley's interviews showed that print textbooks were valued for the same reasons. There was no mention of electronic books at all.

Sundin, Limberg, and Lundh (2008) discuss the need for co-operation between nursing faculty and librarians in information literacy programs because of the importance assigned to evidence-based practice in nursing education. In Sweden,

as in Australia, nursing is 'an example of a formerly vocational education that has become increasingly more academic' (p.24), and using databases is highly relevant.

A 2006 study by Gannon-Leary, Walton, Cader, Derbyshire and Smith used citation analysis procedure as a 'means of assessing the quality of undergraduates' information-seeking skills as an indicator of the efficacy of (or the need for) training'. They found that nursing students in an evidence-based practice assignment were using up-to-date information: 27% books, 37% journals, and 12% web-based sources. 'The fact that nursing students use a higher percentage of journals than of books is pleasing, conforming as it does to expectations, given that health needs analysis requires primary information in order to make judgements.' There was no mention of e-books here either.

Students' limited use of e-books

Appleton's paper on the use of electronic books in midwifery education (2004) has been cited by several others, because he is one of the first researchers to specifically consider student viewpoints on e-books. He researched ten students in their first semester at a College of Further Education in Liverpool, a user group of the e-book collection. Midwives were chosen because they required remote resources when they were away from campus on clinical placement. E-books were actively promoted to this group through information literacy training sessions and through integration of electronic resources embedded into a Virtual Learning Environment. In practice the group found many more disadvantages than advantages in using the e-book collection, in contrast to their pre-use assessment that e-books had very great potential. Students opined that the technical limitations and inconveniences of e-books were tolerable only when reading a few pages and only when studying off-campus.

A case study at Bond University (Abbott and Kelly, 2004) targeted Information Technology students in a trial of an e-book service. The students valued the search function that enabled them to search by keyword across all books in that particular subscription. Abbott and Kelly found that some of the students did not seem to appreciate the difference between the quality of information contained in the e-books and free internet information.

Roesnita and Zainab (2005) examined the pattern of e-book use among undergraduates at the University of Malaysia. Again, Information Technology students formed the sample population. 206 questionnaires were returned with the results indicating that the majority of students (61%) had not used e-books, in spite of positive attitudes and general knowledge about the existence of e-books.

Bennett and Landoni's (2005) study of barriers to uptake of e-books in British higher education communities found that promotion of them needed to be more aggressive. Users not knowing that their universities had e-book collections or not being able to find them in the library catalogue were commonly reported. 28 students were asked by questionnaire and in focus groups about how they used e-books, and only 39% had used any.

Levine-Clark (2006) conducted a large-scale survey at the University of Denver. Of 2067 respondents, 59% were aware of e-books and 51% used one. It became clear during analysis of the results that some respondents confused e-books with e-journals.

Students at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore were surveyed by Buzzetto-More, Sweat-Guy and Elobaid (2007). Only 22% of 261 respondents reported that they had read an e-book. Computer ownership, home internet access and confidence with information technology were all very high among the students, so this low figure of e-book experience indicated to the researchers that 'at this time e-books may be a hard sell in higher education' (p.247).

The title of Gregory's paper (2008), 'But I want a real book', is revealing. Her investigation of undergraduate usage and attitudes toward electronic books, was conducted in 2004 with 105 students at a small liberal arts college in Ohio. The library had purchased an e-book database from NetLibrary in 2000 and subsequently from other vendors. The librarians heavily marketed these resources to faculty and students. During reference interviews it was noted that students searching the library catalogue were reluctant to pursue the e-books which they found. The survey findings showed that while 75% indicated an awareness of e-books, only 39% had used one. 66% preferred using a physical book if given a choice between print and electronic.

Publishers also provide partial reports on the use of their products. Springer (2008) commissioned a white paper on the end-user perspective which surveyed students at five tertiary institutions in various countries (none Australian). Online surveys were used but the exact numbers of respondents is not revealed (H. Wirsching, Springer, Director Market Research, personal email, 30.09.08). Springer claims that awareness of e-books was high and that most respondents had used them at least once. Springer concludes that these are 'encouraging results regarding e-book adoption' (p.2).

Academics do not value e-books

Rowlands, Nicholas, Jamali and Huntington (2007) found that 44% of staff and student respondents to their large-scale e-mail survey at the University College London had used e-books. Attitudes toward e-books varied by age, gender, academic status and by subject. Although this study confirms general interest in e-books, it does not provide significant findings that differentiate staff and student opinions.

Carlock and Perry's (2008) study focused on academic perceptions of e-books. The background information explained that librarians on all eight campuses of Arizona State University 'rely on rapid access and circulation of shared resources between multiple campuses to supplement coverage in interdisciplinary areas' (p.245). The focus group expressed mostly negative responses about their experience with e-books, finding limitations of accessibility and practical use. Faculty were especially cautious about using e-books as textbooks or for course readings due to a perceived learning curve for their students, and believing that the technology was still too

unreliable. Carlock and Perry conclude that 'professors are vitally important in increasing the use of any new teaching or research technology'.

This Study Approach.

The very first cohort of Bachelor of Nursing students at La Trobe University's Shepparton Campus was chosen for this study in 2006 because it was a distinctive, small group of beginning undergraduates. During their first six weeks at university, they were introduced to research skills and in particular to e-books.

This group of students did not have access to a large range of print books. Only core texts were initially purchased by the library. The students were able to borrow from the Goulburn Valley Health / University of Melbourne Library print collection, although the range of books caters mainly to medical students and practitioners. Because of such limited access, during information literacy classes the library staff emphasized the alternative medium of electronic resources provided by the La Trobe University Library, and demonstrated how to find them.

A pre-test was included as part of this research to gauge student self-assessment of their computer competence and searching ability. It was also an opportunity to inquire about expectations -- how they saw electronic resources fitting in with their preferred study style. A short survey was conducted in the second week of semester 2006, during a tutorial session. There were 22 respondents -- a few students were missing from class that day.

A paper-based survey was given at the end of first semester, following an exam, with all 26 students responding. They were asked which electronic resources they had used during the semester and particularly whether they had used e-books. A measure of overall satisfaction with electronic resources was elicited.

The second questionnaire was given to the same group of nursing students now in their final semester in 2008. The remaining 17 students responded (the attrition rate for the course was the loss of 9 students).

Five students volunteered in 2008 to be interviewed for a more in-depth analysis of their attitudes toward e-books. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was recorded with the participant's permission. The interviews were semi-structured, with a standard list of questions, but still allowing topics to be expanded on during the interview (Williamson, 2002). The themes addressed were use of e-books, attitudes toward the perceived advantages and disadvantages of e-books, e-books in reading lists or as textbooks, and promotion strategies to encourage more use of e-books.

Study Results.

Demographic features

The cohort of undergraduate nursing students was of varied age, from school leavers (20 years old) to mature age (over 40). They were a predominantly female group with only one male student. Some of the students were upgrading from a Division 2 nursing certificate and had already worked in hospitals for many years.

Computer skills at the start

All students were asked if they had bought a personal computer or a laptop specifically for their studies toward the Bachelor of Nursing degree. All had. One said that she found she needed one at by the beginning of second year. One had also bought a new PC after her laptop had a meltdown from being on for too many hours at a time.

Of the 22 respondents in the pre-test, 50% considered themselves to have good computer skills with seven nominating excellent skills, leaving four with a lesser competence. Also, 50% had good information-searching skills, three judged themselves to be excellent, with eight saying that they had only a little experience in searching.

When asked about their preference for electronic or print resources, ten students understandably chose the option of 'don't know yet', three preferred print and eight electronic. This open attitude was reflected in a unanimously positive expectation that e-books could assist in their studies.

First semester 2006

By the end of semester one, use of the electronic medium for information-finding by this group of 26 students in their first year of university study was very high. All said they were very satisfied with the electronic resources available to them. Every student had used the Learning Management System (an essential component of teaching and learning at La Trobe University). All had also used the nursing databases CINAHL and OVID for journal searches. Of real interest in this particular survey was their usage of e-books. Despite the heavy promotion in the first few weeks and the enthusiasm conveyed in the early survey, only 54% of students actually accessed e-books. Yet their comments were overwhelmingly positive.

Asked if there were changes or improvements that they could suggest about the access to e-books, six students advised that more titles were needed. Maybe 'use' was loosely defined in their minds -- one student admitted, 'I am not sure how to use them. I have never been able to get past the contents page.'

Slight increase in use by 2008, and the internet alternative

By the end of 2008, our next survey showed that all students had used library databases to find electronic journal articles, and 82% had also used internet sources for this purpose. Two years on, 59% had used e-books. But as shown in Table 1, frequent use was very sparse.

Table 1 Frequency of e-book use

Year	Student numbers	Never	Sometimes	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
2006	26	46%	46 %	0	8%	0
2008	17	41%	41%	12%	6%	0

To compare with the 2006 responses, the e-book users (10 students) were asked if they were using e-books more often now in 2008 (40%), to the same extent (20%), using them less (10%), or had reverted to using print only (20%). Most (60%) of the e-book users responded that they used them as extra references for assignments and accessed them equally either from home or in the university computer laboratory. At the last occasion when they had used an e-book, 50% saved sections to view later. The following tables summarise opinions on advantages, disadvantages and obstacles to use as shown in the 2008 survey.

Table 2 Advantages of e-books (more than one was able to be selected)

Can print out parts instead of photocopying	60%
Cheaper than buying the text	50%
24/7 access	50%
Easy to do keyword searches	30%
Up-to-date information	10%
Save to memory stick to use later	10%

Table 3 Disadvantages of e-books (again more than one response was possible)

Hard to find in the library catalogue	40%
Difficult to read on screen, e.g., font size	40%
Searching did not find what I needed	30%
Printing and copying options not adequate	20%

Table 4 Non-users of e-books

The 7 students who had not used e-books at all (in 2006 or 2008) were asked why they had not. They all chose more than one reason.

I forget they exist	60%
I have no broadband access at home	30%
I do not like the idea of reading an onscreen book	20%
I have heard they are hard to search	10%
I find everything in journals	10%

The students in 2008 reported high use of the internet as distinct from library sources. It is not surprising then that most (82%) were more likely to use the internet rather than the library (either physical or virtual). Overall, satisfaction levels with the electronic resources available to them was high (88%) with only one respondent selecting 'unsatisfactory' to this question.

The 2008 interviews

Unsurprisingly, students who used e-books in their final semester had special reasons. Two of the interviewees were keen to share their experiences. Student A said: 'E-books are convenient as you don't have to carry the book around and you can put in a search and it finds all the references in the book. I copy and paste information into a word document of my own notes after reading on-screen. This is easier than taking notes from a print book.' Student C found the textbooks too broad and used e-books to find quite specific information: 'I like the convenience of not having to go to the library to search for hours. I have no trouble with downloading or reading. I am trying to read more onscreen to avoid the waste of printing.'

Both these students found their preferred e-books through the OVID database, as had been demonstrated to them in first year. Since then the library has bought subscriptions to several other packages of e-books and purchased many single title electronic books as well. Neither student used the library catalogue directly to search for e-books. While it is not clear as to why they did not use the catalogue, it is somewhat disappointing that they did not discover a much wider collection. Student C expressed the frustration: 'The range of e-books is good but there are still not enough, sometimes only one on a particular topic.' Student B was actually looking for e-books by using Google: 'I typed in e-books and found some'. In addition, this student believed that e-books found via the library catalogue had to be paid for!

All interviewed students agreed that a lecturer never mentioned an e-book to them, much less recommended one on a reading list. All were of the opinion that if e-books were linked into the Learning Management System, they would surely use them. The interviewees were quick to give advice when asked about how e-books could be promoted. Student D was emphatic: 'Training in e-books should be reinforced in second year – not third year as you already have your own routine, and there are too many other things going on like placements and job interviews.'

The students had quite mixed feelings when asked in the interviews about the notion of buying an e-textbook if it was set as prescribed reading by academic staff.

Obstacles to e-book Use

There is no shortage of literature about the potential benefits of electronic books to libraries, but this study produced unequivocal evidence of resistance to them by students for many reasons.

Caldwell (2008) outlines the potential advantages of an e-book collection for libraries: it frees up shelf space, reduces costs, provides 'usage' data, and allows

more effective teaching and learning. For a library at a regional campus the following crucial advantage can be added: e-books provide access to a much wider range of books than could be provided in a small core print collection caused by a limited budget. Lim (2000) suggests that users will only accept electronic information sources if the requirements of ease of use are met. This includes an intuitive interface, quick access, effective searching and good image text quality.

The non-users of e-books in this study mention their electronic difficulties. Student D said, 'It's easier to flip through a print book,' and Student E: 'I couldn't quickly find what I was looking for and so stopped using them.'

Access is an issue. Although 70% of students in this study had broadband internet access from home, three used dial-up and one student had no internet access at all.

But not understanding e-books is the greatest identifiable obstacle. Other researchers, for example, Levine-Clark (2006), have also found this was a significant inhibitor of use in their studies of undergraduates. 'To know is to use' is the subtitle of Roesnita and Zainab's 2005 paper. The Shepparton nursing students were remarkably optimistic about how e-books would be useful to their studies when surveyed in first year, but the actual numbers of students using the resource by third year was still disappointingly low. Many students (60% of non-users) indicated that they 'had forgotten all about them'. Borgman (2003) discusses research on the use of information retrieval systems and the disparity in the use of system features. Borgman agrees that novices will not tolerate poor design if they have other alternatives; they will abandon searches rather than reformulate them.

Bennett and Landoni (2005) found the same issue among academics: 'Despite the fact that these academics had been hand-picked by librarians who identified them as having an interest in e-books, 25% did not know their university had an e-book collection' (p.12).

Recommendations for Better Use

Considering possible benefits from investment in e-books as resources for undergraduates, there is scope for top-down strategies to improve adoption. Libraries have to make e-books better known and appreciated. Furthermore, methods to generate genuine (not ephemeral) bottom-up interest must be found if use is to become commonplace.

A study conducted by the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) (2008) focused on user behaviour in digital environments. Although not specifically researching e-books, these were included in the 'virtual library' context. Instead of spending long periods of time reading, users skim quickly and bounce from one source to another. Skimming rather than reading in detail may occur because research has shown that reading from a screen is significantly slower than reading from print (Buzzetto-More et al, 2007, Mercieca, 2004). The CIBER study found that users spend an average of only four minutes on an e-book site but have spent the same amount of time navigating their way there.

E-book content tends to be a digital replication of an original print book (Mercieca, 2004). Users must be able to navigate and comprehend material that was originally prepared as a linear work of chapters. The problem with this design is that it implicitly encourages reference back to print. Student C said: 'You can sort of flip pages in an e-book but it's much easier in a physical book.' Thus the CIBER advises libraries to move away from counting download statistics and to monitor more closely the actual information behaviour of their users.

Caldwell in 2008 claims that there is 'nothing technically stopping e-books from being made available to search engines, improving discoverability and searchability at one stroke' (p.3). Students could then perform a full-text search across all e-books and e-journals in the library catalogue to find the exact information required. But students get lost. Using the e-books within one database, Student C worried that she may be mis-referencing a source as she is 'not sure what book I'm in'. Acknowledging the correct citation becomes her problem.

One way that the use of e-books could be encouraged is to set them as textbooks for learning. All students interviewed said that they would read an e-book if it were on a reading list. Other commentators agree (Bennett and Landoni, 2005; Rowlands, Nicholas, Jamali and Huntington, 2007). Simon (2001) found users were clearly pleased with the experience during a trial where they were given a Rocket eBook loaded with all of the assigned reading for an introductory science course. The students all indicated that they would pay the \$200 necessary to purchase the model they had trailed.

In contrast, if experience is negative, then students are reluctant to ever use another e-book (Kropma, Schoch and Teoh, 2004). Most of the Shepparton nursing students interviewed were not keen about the concept of buying an e-textbook if it was prescribed reading. Their reasons were diverse: 'I like books'; 'only if an upgrade is free'; 'it doesn't sound like value for money'. The thought of having to pay for electronic resources is not something that they are accustomed to.

More than just appearing on a reading list, if e-books were linked into the curriculum, then most students enrolled in that course would use them. Appleton (2005) provides an elegant definition of what is meant by embedding into the curriculum: 'It is not just simply the placement of hyperlinks to electronic resources but the strategic and planned referral to specific electronic resources, and the inclusion of intentional activities requiring the use of and reflection upon such resources' (p. 56). Statistics in Appleton's study showed cited titles being accessed far more often than would be possible with print equivalents.

More so than their students, academic staff suffer a severe lack of awareness of e-books. No students interviewed for this study had heard a lecturer mention e-books during classes once. Maybe involvement of academic staff in selection of e-books would help them become more aware of the resources.

Ongoing promotion of e-books will remind students. A good example of this is on the La Trobe University library home page that often features an e-book in the 'what's new' section, or in the library blog (La Trobe University Library, 2008).

Conclusions

This was a small-scale research project. The students surveyed and interviewed were from one faculty of a regional university campus. Further studies of larger groups are desirable. But this study (along with earlier published studies) demonstrated that research into student and academic ignorance of e-books is sadly lacking. Labelling an electronic text a 'book', and designing it on strictly old-fashioned lines, may not encourage an appreciation of its unique qualities. Research which explores the effectiveness of training programs (top-down) combined with thorough analysis of all users' needs for e-books would reveal much about their real (rather than financial) value and about better implementation of e-book systems.

By means of this study, our group of undergraduate nursing students at a regional campus provides the library with knowledge of the ways that they use e-books and strategies which may be successful in encouraging better use. Students state clearly that they need to be reminded about the usefulness of e-books often, and where to find them within the library catalogue, both during orientation to university sessions, but also again in the subsequent years of their degree.

Acceptance from academic staff is another key to increased undergraduate usage. This can be achieved by the setting e-books for recommended reading, creating links to e-books within the Learning Management System, and embedding use of e-books in the curriculum. If promoted effectively, then e-books will become a valued resource which students use productively.

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