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e-Textbooks: Is Now the Right Time?

By: Dr. Shu Schiller, Department of Information Systems & Operations Management, Raj Soin College of Business, Wright State University

Don't be surprised when you see NOOK and iPads sitting along the side of books in campus bookstores this fall. Among numerous types of digital tools and technologies used in classrooms today, e-textbooks seem to be the next rising star. In the arena of higher education, educators have long been using digital materials and tools for teaching and learning. Many universities have adopted campus-wide online course management applications such as products from BlackBoard and Desire2Learn. Online meeting tools such as GoToMeeting, Elluminate, and Adobe Connect have now transformed the traditional delivery of teaching and lecturing to a synchronized, real-time interaction online. The world is now witnessing another trend of digital content consumption happening in higher education, and this time it's the textbooks.

According to the Association of American Publishers, e-book sales in February 2011, for the first time, topped all other formats including paperbacks and hardcovers. In that month, e-book sales made 90.3 million dollars, a 202.3% increase compared to the same month of last year. On May 20, 2011, Amazon made a historical announcement: e-book sales on Amazon have officially passed paperback sales: for every 100 paperbacks sold, Amazon had sold 105 e-books.

The adoption and use of e-textbooks certainly will require the input of multiple stakeholders, among whom educators play a central role. Educational leaders have demonstrated the early success of e-textbooks across the country. California State University started an "Affordable Learning Solutions" campaign in 2010 and launched MERLOT (multimedia educational resources for learning and online teaching), which offers over 24,000 free open online course materials including e-textbooks. With the help of the campaign, 73% of students bought e-textbooks in courses that offered that option, much higher than the 46% of students in traditional courses who actually bought the textbook for that course. The California State University's campaign indicates the potential for huge and rapid growth in e-textbook sales.

In the 2011 Horizon Report published by EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) of New Media Consortium (NMC) in February¹, researchers describe six areas of emerging technology that will have significant impact on higher education. This year electronic books are prominently featured in the report. If it is just a matter of time for e-textbooks to come, is now the right time? How should educators prepare for the transformation from paper books to e-textbooks?

The main components of e-textbooks are the book content and the reading device for electronic delivery. First and foremost, textbook content is the key. The purpose

of any textbook is to present the principles of a subject for study. Despite the modes of delivery, the content of textbooks is the unconditionally critical reason why textbooks are used for educational purpose. There are primarily two ways to develop content for e-textbooks, digitizing the content from the traditional books (in this case the content is transformed to the electronic mode) or creating from scratch by authors who write e-textbooks for publishers. The titles of e-textbooks are expected to grow fast in the next year or two while more and more publishers start to provide books in the electronic version. For instance, CourseSmart, who works with numerous publishers, now offers 90% of the core textbooks used today in North American higher education in the electronic version². An open question is how soon authors and publishers will develop e-books that utilize the unique features of electronic media, such as audio and video, or interactive content such as problems, quizzes and other exercises.

E-textbooks are now supported by a plethora of devices, such as iPad and the Apple family of products, smart phones, Kindle, and Sony reader, just to name a few. Let's not forget about the computer-based applications (windows, mac, and linux all included) such as NOOKstudy, which allows reading e-textbooks on computers without any other hand-held devices. In addition, renting e-textbooks has become a popular option to students. The short-term rental plans (such as 60 or 90 days with nookstudy) have been welcomed by many students. The increasing affordability of these reading options makes e-textbooks more accessible and acceptable to higher education.

Like any other digital transformation, the adoption of e-textbooks goes beyond the content and the devices; it requires a re-examination of the generation, delivery, and evaluation of the teaching and learning process. The success of e-textbooks in higher education takes the collective effort from all stakeholders including students, educators, booksellers, publishers, and administrators. For instance, the Master programs at the Department of Information Systems & Operations Management, Wright State University are now considering offering e-textbooks on some subjects in the curricula, with the purpose to reduce cost, increase usability, and make continuous improvement to course delivery. We will provide you with updates on our implementations efforts and experiences. Happy e-booking!

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¹ <http://www.educause.edu/resources/2011horizonreport/223122>

² <http://www.coursesmart.com/overview>

