

The Plymouth ebook project

Philip Gee
Plymouth University

“Puts everyone at an advantage right from the beginning of the course and not only the people who can afford books.”

First year student, Plymouth University

Most of us will be familiar with the term “reading for a degree”. All academics earnestly urge students to “read around” the topic of their lectures, and all are familiar with student essays showing little evidence of it. Should we be surprised? A lecturer may recommend reading Chapter 3, but to do so the student must have paid for a copy, or be able to borrow it from a library¹. Even the best-funded library may be unable to meet demand for key texts near coursework deadlines or exams.

¹ There has always been another way for unscrupulous students to access books. Those with the skill and nerve could steal from a shop or library. But recently it has become possible to download pirated copies. The amount of skill and nerve required is much lower, and moral qualms may be easy to overcome for students used to getting music and movies that way. I think this will be a major challenge to academic publishers, and a compelling reason for them to encourage schemes such as ours.

How to cite this book chapter:

Gee, P. 2014. The Plymouth ebook project. In: Woodward, H. (ed.) *Ebooks in Education: Realising the Vision*. Pp. 119–124. London: Ubiquity Press.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bal.m>

Library ebooks will ease the problem somewhat, but these typically have restrictions on the number of simultaneous users and limits on downloading for offline use. The experience of reading them with a slow internet connection can be frustrating, and they are hard to use on the smaller screens of tablets and mobile phones.

No cost to the students

In this chapter I describe the Plymouth ebook project, which provides a set of core textbooks to students at Plymouth University in ebook format, at no extra cost to the student. The project started with my own subject, psychology, and has since extended to cover a number of others.

As a lecturer in psychology, I have long since negotiated with publishers for discounts on textbooks I recommend. Students are more likely to read around the topics I cover if they have a personal copy. By 2010 I was programme leader for BSc Psychology. The Plymouth ebook project started in the autumn of that year, when a colleague suggested I should extend the range of books I negotiated on. Instead of just my own modules, why not all those we recommended to first years?

I set about compiling a list of core textbooks. What is a core textbook? Any lecturer will have encountered students who, having been given a reading list, says they can buy just one of the books. Which should it be? It is those we defined as core. It turned out that in the first year of the psychology degree there were 12 of them. My original plan had been simply to negotiate a price on behalf of our students, just as I had for print. However, my colleagues and I decided we should supply the books at no cost to the student. Even if we negotiated a fabulous bargain, if students had to pay some would choose not to. Giving them away means we can exploit the potential of the books in teaching and learning more effectively. We can teach knowing that every student has a copy of the core text. There were obvious benefits to inclusivity, too. Affordability would no longer be a barrier. Furthermore, with ebooks students can set the font size, background and text colours to suit their needs and preferences, and the text is accessible to assistive technology.

Negotiation with publishers

I explained my plan to the publishers. It soon became apparent that, where print copies were concerned, the discounts on offer were relatively small. I also became concerned about the practicality of delivering a bundle of 12 print books to each of 360 students. Ebooks seemed to offer a number of advantages. First, this relatively new format appeared to enable publishers to

think more flexibly about price. There are longstanding agreements and commercial relationships to be taken account of in the supply of print, but digital material allows a more or less direct business relationship between publisher and university. The other attractions of a package of ebooks for publishers include savings in production and distribution, that their customer buys a copy for every student rather than their selling to only a proportion, and that ebooks are tied to an account and so cannot be sold second-hand. They also benefit from a more predictable customer, with the opportunity to develop multi-year agreements that provide a more stable business environment.

For academics, the main advantage is that they can teach in the knowledge that every student has access to the core reading, and that many have it to hand whenever they have their laptop, tablet or smartphone with them. Few students would carry heavy books around to all their classes, but they have these devices with them most of the time.

Collaboration with the library

I should explain at this point that it was I, as programme leader, who carried out negotiations with publishers, and the scheme was funded from departmental rather than central library funds. I conferred with and had help from library colleagues throughout, but the library budget for first year psychology texts was far too small to cover our ambitions, even if we had opted to spend all of it on these 12 titles. It was clear that if the school wanted to proceed, it would have to provide the funds.

Furthermore, our thinking was not that the books should replace library resources. Rather, we saw this as an opportunity to enhance them. The library had traditionally held around 30 copies of each new edition of core psychology texts. When we set up our ebook scheme, our library was able to redirect spending so we only took three. These catered to students who did not want to use an electronic text, and to those on other programmes who needed to consult a psychology text. Spending that had previously gone on the other 27 copies was redirected to books used by second- and final-year students. Holding more copies of texts that final-year students use, which tend to be more specialist and more expensive, and less likely to be needed for long periods, is a better use of library resources. In this way, supplying core texts to first years enabled us to better serve second- and final-year students.

The interface and software

When we first talked to publishers, they were keen that the books should be made available through their own platform. This would have meant students

could only read books through an online browser, and using a different interface for each publisher. It also gives the user the impression that the books are a publisher's property that they have allowed limited access to. We made it clear we were only interested in books that students could have a sense of ownership over, that could be used offline, and that could be read on a mobile device. It should be a similar experience to buying a book for a Kindle.

That the student feels they own the text is important because we hope they will invest time and effort in making highlights and notes on their books, just as many do on personal copies of print books. That they should be downloadable for use offline is important because the internet is not always available; students may want to catch up on reading during a train journey, for example. That they could be read on a mobile device was important partly because reading from a tablet is more pleasant than a computer screen, and partly because they might find themselves unexpectedly with half an hour spare. If their books are on their phone, they can use that to fill the time productively. Indeed, we have had feedback from students who have read textbooks while queuing at a supermarket checkout.

We delivered our first batch of ebooks in September 2011. Students were sent an email containing instructions on how to set up an account with the suppliers of the software we were using, VitalSource Bookshelf, along with a redemption code for their books. We chose Bookshelf because at the time it was the only system that allowed download for offline use, and that would work on computers running Mac OS X or Windows, and on mobile devices running iOS or Android, as well as allowing access through a browser on any other device.

Survey of student views

After two weeks, I ran an anonymous web survey of our students. Feedback on the scheme was the most positive I had ever seen. A typical comment was: "Excellent scheme, very impressive use of new media technology. Can't honestly believe I'd be starting with every core book dropped into my lap, wonderful surprise."

Very few made negative comments, and those that did almost exclusively concerned extended reading from computer screens: "It can be difficult to sit and read through many chapters at once on a computer screen compared to sitting and reading a paper copy of the text. After a while it can cause strain to the eyes which can be uncomfortable and increases headaches." I believe that, as more students acquire tablets, much better devices for extended reading, this will become less of an issue.

I followed up this first survey with a more extensive one at the end of the autumn term, and again at the end of the academic year. These, and surveys in subsequent years, have given similar results; across more than 1,300 responses, a mean of 95% agree or strongly agree that the scheme is a good idea.

Text comments

One feature that students found especially valuable was that I could make text comments on my copy, and share these with them. I suspect I am not alone in not actually having read much of the main text recommended for my first year module. Each of my lectures ends with a suggestion to read Chapter x before next week, but I had never properly read Chapter x myself. That is not to say I had taken no care in choosing the recommended text. However, that care consisted of checking the table of contents and skim reading a few sections.

Given the opportunity to share notes with my students, I started to work my way through the text more thoroughly. As I went, I found sections to which I could add comments about examples given in lectures. I also found sections that I disagreed with, where I felt the authors were giving a biased view, that were not well explained, or where I could give a hyperlink to more recent research. Students who subscribed to my notes would see them appear in the relevant places on their own books. These notes had a valuable role in making clear that the textbook was a contestable document, not the last word on a subject. My notes proved popular, especially as some would indicate sections I wouldn't be asking questions on in the exam. The notes clearly helped draw students to the text.

Students also shared notes with each other in informal study groups. The relatively simple technology of note sharing has transformed reading from a solitary experience to a social one. It has helped foster a sense of membership of a wider scholarly community.

Conclusions

The ebook scheme was such a success that we offered to set up similar arrangements for colleagues in other schools. We launched ebook schemes in marine biology, environmental science, earth science, geography, and computer science in September 2012. In 2013, the scheme expanded even further to biology, biomedical sciences, maths and statistics, and accountancy. I now lead a project exploring the possibility of extending it across all undergraduate programmes at Plymouth, and am seeking funding to share our experiences with other universities.

If schemes such as ours are to become more widespread, they must be affordable. Surveys at Plymouth suggest that only about two-thirds of students buy any books at all in their first year. If you average those who do not with the ones who do buy books, the amount spent per student is about £62 ($n = 700$), and that is through retailers who typically take a 30% cut. If the academic publishing industry can be persuaded to supply books to schemes such as ours for the same revenue they currently get from sales to individual

students, the approach will thrive. I am sure most universities would spend more than £62 per student to give first years a full set of core texts.

Widespread core ebooks schemes would benefit academic publishers, universities and, of course, students. They would protect publishers from declining sales, undermine the second hand-book market, and reduce the threat from piracy. Students and their universities would be the main beneficiaries, however. Students would save substantial amounts of money, have unprecedented access to core material, see increased spending on second- and final-year texts, and benefit from technological developments such as the interactive features Plymouth is helping publishers embed in future e-textbooks. And for academics, such schemes will restore the pleasure of teaching students who really are “reading for a degree”.