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INTERNET CONNECTION

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Given the challenging economic climate in the United States, many academics are looking to open-access electronic textbooks as a way to provide students with traditional textbook content at a more financially advantageous price. Open access refers to "the free and widely available information throughout the World Wide Web. Once an article's author or copyright holder gives express consent, an open-access journal or archive may post its content over the Internet" ("Access, Open" 2009). Most, if not all, open-access textbook initiatives are electronic, although some also have print components as well.

The price of open-access electronic textbooks is certainly attractive to students, but the possibility raises the question of whether students want electronic textbooks, or whether—despite the increasingly digital nature of most students' existence—students still prefer print textbooks.

Flat World Knowledge (http://www.flatworldknowledge.com) is an intriguing open-access textbook publisher with an interesting model: "The basic idea of Flat World Knowledge is to make textbooks free and openly available online through a Creative Commons license. The company charges a fee for printing, but this open licensing structure is facilitating many new things in the textbook industry, allowing for customization and freeing faculty members from the pain of new editions" (Baron 2010, 44). This model, a free online edition with an optional for-sale version, is referred to as a hybrid model (Adema and Schmidt 2010, 30). Flat World books can be ordered and shipped to the user, printed by the user, or downloaded as e-books (readable using an e-book reader), with each non-browser-based version involving a cost. Flat World publications are peer reviewed and professionally edited and designed; authors are paid a royalty rate of 20% on all sales and retain

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copyright of their books (Lerner and Dillon 2010, 5). Faculty members using a Flat World book can rearrange and delete sections and chapters, as well as add annotations for their students.

Wikibooks (http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Main_Page) is a conceptually similar model, with books freely available online. Wikibooks is part of the Wikimedia Foundation, the same organization behind Wikipedia. Like Flat World, Wikibooks content can be adjusted by a faculty member. Unlike the Flat World model, anyone can edit the content of a Wikibook, and books undergo no formal peer-review process. Also, unlike the Flat World Knowledge model, there are no fee-based printing and download options. The entire experience is browser based, unless a user chooses to craft his or her own download/e-book solution out of the Wikibook content. An Amazon.com search for Wikibooks reveals a number of publishers selling print versions of Wikibook content.

The Connexions repository (http://cnx.org), a product of Rice University, is another source for open-access textbook content. "Connexions provides tools to authors for creating content that ranges from single-topic treatments to complete textbooks. Instructors can create integrated textbooks from any of the modular content already in the Connexions repository and from any content created or imported by the instructor" (Baker et al. 2009, 2). Like the other projects discussed, the textbooks are available for free online, or can be printed on demand for a fee.

The Community College Open Textbook Project (CCOT) (http://collegeopentextbooks.org) is another open-access electronic textbook project, this one designed to address the needs of a community college audience. The CCOT has worked with the Connexions project to develop open-access textbooks for community college faculty. CCOT has an interesting review process: "The content review process includes reviewing self-selected chapters of the textbook, writing a reviewer's statement, evaluating the textbook using an online (public) rating system, and contributing to an online discussion forum with other faculty reviewers" (Baker 2009, 32). Where Connexions and Flat World Knowledge seem to place more of an emphasis on modular content, CCOT is more rooted in the traditional textbook creation paradigm, with all of the advantages and disadvantages that model entails.

Merlot, the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (http://www.merlot.org), is yet another open-access electronic textbook project, this one developed by California State University. Considered to be the largest and most scholarly of the open-access textbook projects, it includes educational material, like quizzes and tutorials, in addition to textbooks (Polanka 2010, 69). Merlot also has a peer-review process for its material, although, like CCOT, it includes material that has not yet been reviewed in its collection (and is identified as such).

Faculty members have many choices when it comes to open-access textbook platforms, vendors, and models, but many are not aware of the options. As more faculty become interested in electronic books as a whole, open-access electronic textbooks present an interesting option. Not only are they cost-effective for students, but because they are open-access, piracy is not an issue for the vendors. This means students and faculty do not have to deal with the limitations often introduced by digital rights management (DRM). Some have accused DRM of inhibiting the growth of electronic books on two fronts: the content and the readers themselves (Spring 2010, 24).

While on the subject of electronic book readers, please note this overview of open-access electronic textbooks has not factored in the possible impact of the Apple iPad, which many say will have a tremendous impact on the book publishing industry (Tonkery 2010). The iPad, a tablet-like computer, combines the portability of an electronic book reader with the functionality of a laptop, including light word processing, Web browsing, and photo management. Because the iPad is so new, its impact on open-access electronic textbook publishing cannot be discussed, but this is definitely an issue worth following.

While the possibility of open-access textbooks seems intriguing to librarians, who are generally interested in both simple, inexpensive access to high-quality information and who often find their book collection budgets hamstrung by at least some textbook purchasing, it is worth asking how students seem to feel about electronic textbooks, open access or otherwise. While open-access electronic textbooks have the potential to be a huge boon to academic libraries, librarians must make sure they are something students and faculty can use successfully.

Back in 2006, a veritable lifetime in technology years, Vernon reported how master's of social work degree students used a completely online textbook instead of a paper one. At the time of the study, with less access to mobile devices, smart phones, netbooks, electronic book readers, and WiFi, students did not universally find the online textbook experience to be positive (422). Many students reported printing out copies of the online book, and many said reading online took longer than reading from a print book. Vernon's fascinating study used a very specific student segment, though, so there's always the chance his results were not necessarily representative of students as a whole, especially since his study did not use undergraduates.

A later study, by Shepperd, Grace, and Koch, published in 2008, did use undergraduate students. The study gave 392 students the choice between a print text and a CD version of the text, with the CD being the less expensive option. However, students purchasing the print text also had access to the CD version. Most students chose the print text, with just 10% opting for the CD. Those who opted for only the CD did not evaluate it as a favorable

experience (Shepperd, Grace, and Koch 2008, 4). It is important to note that the issues might have been related to the usability of that particular electronic textbook. Also, the CD experience limited students to laptops and desktops with optical drives, and not whatever more portable computing options might have been available in 2008.

The year after Shepperd, Grace, and Koch's study was published, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* speculated that 2009 could be "the year of e-Textbooks" (Young 2009, A1). This theory seemed to be predicated on the arrival of the Amazon Kindle, an electronic book reader. However, more recent studies of student electronic textbook usage have not supported the *Chronicle's* theory. Woody, Daniel, and Baker's study of undergraduate student preferences for electronic textbooks over print ones found that students prefer the physical textbooks (2010, 947). This study examined past use of electronic books, though, so one cannot say whether students were having a negative response to browser-based books, CD-ROMs, electronic readers, or a combination of the three.

Berg, Hoffmann, and Dawson's interesting study of how students use browser-based electronic books (not necessarily textbooks) found that students can more easily work with the print versions, which are usually more familiar to them (2010, 523). The authors found students preferred using e-books in a nonlinear way, rather than for reading cover to cover. This preference is significant when one considers that many textbooks in certain disciplines are designed to be read in a linear, cover-to-cover way.

Finally, it is worth noting that a recent *New York Times* article declared students prefer paper textbooks to electronic (2010, A21). While the methodology for the *New York Times* verdict is based upon anecdotes and not rigorous research, it should be mentioned here, given the number of faculty members who probably saw the article and formed an impression on the viability of electronic textbooks based upon the *Times'* reporting.

If librarians are interested in promoting open-access textbooks around their campuses, they need to be aware of the various open-access electronic textbook options, but also of what the literature says about student responses to electronic textbooks (and books) to date. Open-access electronic textbooks are an interesting idea with potentially wonderful benefits for both students and librarians. But the technology and concepts are still very new and require teaching, training, and conversations on campuses before the idea can be considered fully ready to push out across colleges and universities. Librarians need to take the lead on determining the usability of open-access electronic textbooks, making sure they're usable across browsers and electronic book readers. Open-access electronic books offer students and faculty an inexpensive resource coupled with useful features, like the ability to keyword search a text. But these features are only helpful if students and faculty agree to use the electronic text, and if, once they agree to use it, they can use the electronic books effectively.

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