

Assessments of E-Textbook Availability

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Abstract:

The paper debuts partial findings from the author's two longitudinal study in college context to provide an alternative perspective on e-textbook availability and usability issues. A thorough investigation of actual textbook titles of the university the author teaches at from Fall 2012 to Spring 2016 discloses that many instructor-assigned textbooks do not have electronic counterparts; even if they do, most of them are kindle-like only, not a version which libraries can purchase for use by multiple students. The publishers of the selected textbooks are highly diverse. A few high-profile educational publishers' claim on high rate of dual format publication cannot speak for all.

The textbook reading is perceived completely different from leisure or intermittent reading where cell phone could suffice. Ownership or access to proper readers has to be taken into consideration. The word cloud of student comments on e-textbook experience illustrates a few perceived impeding reasons for adopting e-textbooks.

Keywords: E-Textbook, Accessibility, Usability, Publishers

Introduction

One of the “big three” educational publishers¹ has long ago claimed a 95% rate of parallel publication of print and electronic textbooks. (Keizer, 2010) Similar related remarks more or less created or reinforced the impression that adopting e-textbooks in college class settings is simply the professor's preference and/or the students' willingness because availability is not an issue since. Through examining the faculty assigned textbook titles from Fall 2012 to Spring

¹ Noonoo, S. (2012). How 'Big Three' Publishers Are Approaching iPad Textbooks. *THE Journal*. <https://thejournal.com/articles/2012/11/08/how-big-three-publishers-are-approaching-their-ipad-textbooks.aspx> Retrieved May 17, 2018.

2016, supplementing with student perception on e-textbook usability, the paper assesses the availability of e-textbooks in the real teaching setting. The assessment of availability can be examined from at least two perspectives: the accessibility and usability, as depicted in Figure 1.

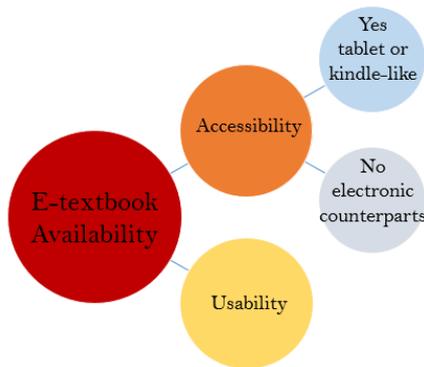


Figure 1. Elements in assessment of e-textbook availability

The paper explores hence two major issues: 1) whether or not current e-textbooks on market fulfils the faculty need in quantity, and 2) the probable reasons behind the student's willingness of supplementing or supplanting print textbooks by electronic counterparts.

The paper debuts partial results from the author's two longitudinal studies in college context. Findings from the first one reveal genuine e-textbook availability, pricing and marketing strategies in context, and library acquisitions perplexity; those of the second one explores obstacles in e-book reader/interface design that ultimately mount stiff resistance to the student's adoption of e-textbooks across different subjects and majors. The findings may provide an alternative perspective on inspecting e-textbook availability issues. The assessment perspectives and figures hope to expand the understanding of the current state of e-textbook availability and learning.

The paper also aims at raising educational publishers' awareness in re-evaluating sale policies, and help improve the design of hardware and interface, in particular in the Asia market. The increase of college students' acceptance towards e-textbooks would doubtlessly be as one of the outgrowths.

Research Method

The findings on the rate of electronic version publication emerged from the pilot study of the author's 2017 MOST-funded (Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan) research project. The author first requested a purchase list of textbook titles and publication information from Fall 2012 to Spring 2016 from the library of National Chung-Hsing University, where the author teaches at. The library has been soliciting textbook titles from faculty two to three months before the beginning of every semester since 2007 when the Department of Education sent a government official letter requiring all universities to purchase at least one copy of textbook for students in order to prevent possible pirate behavior. Unless specified by the professor, the library purchased print textbook for cost concern. The faculty's responses to the library call has not been as enthusiastic as desired. The library thus decided to adopt a more assertive strategy in Fall 2012 and afterwards. The librarians actively searched on course syllabi in the university course management system for textbooks assigned by instructors who have not responded before the end of summer or winter vacations prior. The research samples library textbook lists of 2012 academic year and after to take advantage of the magnitude. The

course titles and instructors' names have been deleted in advance for privacy concerns. The list contains 406 unique titles in total after eliminating duplicated titles after data scrubbing. The research team searched against WorldCat, Amazon, and the textbook publishers to find out whether or not each title has an electronic version.

The second project was actually an incidental one in the beginning. The author first designed an e-textbook/e-book experience assignment in 2012 in the general education course that the author teaches every alternative semester. The assignment meant to promote the use of e-textbook and scholarly e-book collection in the university library. It required the students to write down short comments from the experience. Contrary to what the author thought, the opinion was almost one-sided towards favoring print textbooks, with only sporadic friendly comments on electronic versions. The author has recorded the comments and observed for changes over the years ever since. Surprisingly, not much significant changes happened while significant improvement shown in popular e-book reading. With students' oral consents, the author extracted words from student comments from the 2017 assignment and made 3 word clouds to illustrate the positive and negative comments which might assist in finding out the impeding reasons.

Findings

The findings are organized into figures and graphs. The findings about the textbook format is categorized into print only, electronic only, and both print and electronic versions (further into the university-own and not), and is depicted in Figure 2. It is gratifying to note that almost seventy percent (69.4%, including the grey and orange areas) of the instructor-assigned textbooks in total publish in both print and electronic format. It is, however, not as high as some big publishers claimed though. The orange area in the big circle in figure 1 represents the percentage of the e-textbooks that students can access from the library (different shades of orange represent different channels of access).

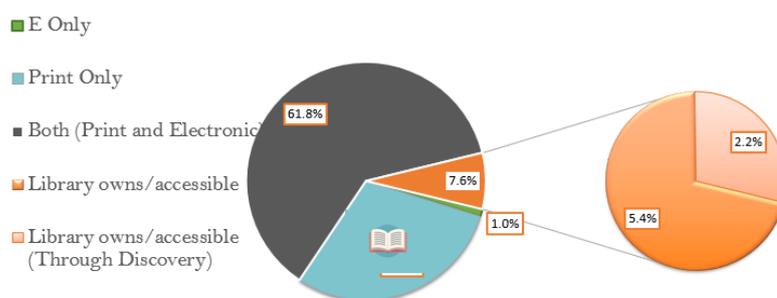


Figure 2. Textbooks publication formats

Figure 3 shows publication years and format of the 406 textbooks. It conveys two messages: 1) the instructors update textbooks frequently, as most textbooks are published within 10 years; and 2) the more recently published textbooks (e.g., in recent 10 years) have a higher rate of dual format publication.

Discussion

The findings reveal that as many as 70.4% of the textbooks have dual formats or are digital-born. In other words, roughly 30% of the instructor-assigned textbooks do not have electronic counterparts. The majority of the e-textbooks are kindle-like personal copy only, not sharable versions which libraries can purchase for use by multiple students, and for classroom teaching and demonstration.

Unlike a tablet or Kindle-like version, which aims for personal purchase and use, the “Library sharable” version is one that licensed to academic libraries for all or class-registered campus students and viewable on different readers including personal computers. Not every textbook that publishes with kindle-like version would also have a library version. For students who do not purchase personal version and cannot obtain it from the library, the accessibility could be considered minimal. The availability information of library version for each textbook is not easily obtainable without book dealers’ help. The accurate data are still waiting for dealers’ replies as time of this writing. The analysis of library version accessibility shall be carried out afterwards. The accessibility reported in this paper is mostly about the tablet/kindle-like version.

Cost is almost always an important concern in any consumer behavior, be it buying or rental. Pricing can be considered one of the perspectives on e-textbook availability for students, in particular in Asia whose consumer price index is relatively lower than those of most English-written textbook publishing countries. Taking USA, Taiwan and China as examples for comparative purpose, Consumer Price Index (CPI) 2018 in the United States is 250.01 Index Points whereas 101.81 Index Points in Taiwan and 101.80 Index Points in China (Trading Economics, n.d.) Students in the abovementioned “half-CPI” areas may rather opt to share a print textbook with his/her classmates or access one from the library than purchase an electronic counterpart for individual use only.

Least copies of e-textbook license for library version is an issue worthy of further discussion. Students from non-English-speaking countries, probably constrained by reading comprehension and speed, often have different textbook use pattern from those from English-speaking countries. Textbooks may be only a secondary tool in college learning to professors’ Powerpoint slides or class notes. That e-textbook featuring easy keyword searching and linking to specific texts for verification or partial/specific readings fits the core need of non-English-speaking students. In consideration of usage, charging for high number of least copies in non-English-speaking Asian areas is probably elusive. It is also hard for the library to convince the university budget decision makers, be it sounds reasonable or already of great discount in relatively high CPI countries. The prevalence of e-textbooks in college education may not be possible when neither students nor libraries consider them affordable. In another word, even the e-textbook is available on publication market, it may not be for students and academic libraries in Asia.

Some students still claim that print book is the best. Many of them never had a chance nor desired to experience e-textbooks, be they under the influence of preemptive belief or lack of money for appropriate readers. Cell phone is not good enough for serious and continuous studying. The textbook reading is almost completely different from leisure or intermittent reading where cell phone might suffice. Library version is a good start for promoting the e-textbook for better learning experience and of course to diminish the digital divide for those who cannot afford proprietary readers.

NCHU library started to ask professors to make their own choices of the textbook format the library would buy for them beginning in Fall 2017. The data about faculty's selection is under collection and analysis, and findings will be published in the near future to better understand the instructors' preferences and reasons. Owning or easy access to a proper reader is another concern. The author is conducting a questionnaire survey to investigate the students' ownership or access to proper e-textbook readers.

Finally, faculty frequently receive new book flyers/booklets from publishers and/or book dealers; many use them to survey for alternative or better textbooks, or to simply update editions. The author seldom received flyers/booklets noting the availability of electronic version. The information could encourage the faculty to specifically recommend to or request an electronic copy from the library if such information is provided. While online bookstores, such as Amazon, endeavor in promoting e-books to direct customers (students), the publishers ought not to ignore the faculty influence and library purchase decision.

Conclusions

The findings suggest that there are still rooms for the educational publishers to strive by publishing more and better-interfaced e-textbooks. A thorough investigation of the Fall 2012 to Spring 2016 textbook list from the university library discloses that even with the support of large publishers, the e-textbook publication cannot completely fulfil the textbook need. Approximately 70% of textbooks assigned by the faculty have electronic versions. It means that the option of choosing e-textbook is not possible to some classes. Quite a few of the "70%" do not offer library versions. The e-textbook without a library license option is possibly not available at all to students either. According to the word cloud produced by the extraction of the words in the comments from the assignment experience, the inconvenience of note-making was most frequently and strongly criticized by the students.

The academic library has to transform as the university teaching and studying culture is under fast transformation. Academic libraries, at least those in Asia, must be more assertive in providing e-textbooks to facilitating classroom teaching and student learning. Library version deserves more studies of feasible renting options. Librarians need to negotiate better library e-textbook deals. As cited in the classical textbook by Evans (2015): "We haven't been as visionary, vigilant, or assertive as we need to be when it comes to mapping our future in the e-book world." (Losinski, 2012, p. 26) Academic librarians should actively provide e-textbook information to faculty.

The paper hopes to raise the interests of all stakeholders in the development of college e-textbooks in re-examining library marketing policy after being exposed to the findings. The "wimpy" students' complaints and suggestions are valuable advices and guidance for making a big step forward the success of the e-textbook. Good accessibility and usability help make true availability.

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