People Profile: Wilhelm Widmark

Editor

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Evaluation of the Pilot Project

By August 2002 we had a working system and five eBooks in the pilot project. Before we introduced the eBooks to the students, we contacted the teachers concerned and presented the project. Most of the teachers were positive, but some of them did not think that certain books were suited for an electronic format, and they felt students should have hard copy textbooks in print form. The eBooks provided were for four different courses within the two different subjects. We presented the project in the introductory lectures of the courses. In conjunction with the completion of the courses we handed out a questionnaire to get responses to the project.

To examine students’ attitudes towards the project we asked students what they thought about the idea of textbooks as eBooks. Most of the students (65%) said that the idea was good or very good, some found it neither good nor bad (24%) and only 3% found it bad or very bad. Another interesting question asked if students were ready to pay for textbooks in electronic form. A large percentage (37%) answered that they did not want to pay for eBooks, 33% said maybe, and 25% were willing to pay for eBooks. Afterwards, I realized that we should also have asked how many were interested in reading eBooks if they did not have to pay for it. That so many of the students did not want to buy their textbooks as eBooks was an expected result. It is understandable that many of the students do not want to read their literature directly on a computer screen or to pay to do so. In the meantime, 58% were somewhat ready to pay for eBooks and we found that promising enough to continue the project.

Something that interested us was how the students had acquired their textbooks. Most of the respondents (60%) had bought them, 20% had borrowed them and 10% had photocopied them. Many students want to own their literature, but the eBooks would be an alternative for those who photocopied textbooks or found them too expensive. They are also a good alternative in those cases when only a few chapters from a book need to be read. We had expected that a larger percentage of the students would photocopy their textbooks. (For publishers this was good news.) Of course, this percentage breakdown would probably vary depending on the cost of the textbook in the bookstore. The books in the project had a rather modest price due to the fact that the publishers would not make their expensive bestsellers accessible in the form of eBooks.

The survey respondents were given the opportunity to give their own comments. They noted both positive and negative aspects of eBooks. There were many who expressed their love for printed books. Some pointed out the inconvenience of reading off the computer screen. Others responded positively to eBooks. One respondent said “It went better than I thought and I will really in the future continue to read eBooks.” There were some comments indicating that they would have used the eBooks if they had known about the project earlier. Some wanted more eBooks and felt that the electronic format would be more useful. None of the respondents made any comments addressing the fact that students had to pay for the downloading.

Conclusions

The project answered many of our questions. Since its completion we have continued to acquire eBooks from eBrArY, netLibrary and directly from publishers. The usage statistics on eBooks are high and many of the students, researchers and teachers are pleased with the new format. We did not continue with the textbook project, because a commercial firm started its own platform and had an exclusive contract with the largest publisher of textbooks in Sweden. The market in Sweden is too small to gain from two different eBook alternatives. I am sorry to say that the new commercial platform has not yet come up with a pricing model that suits academic libraries. But we have an ongoing discussion, so we will hopefully come to a solution that suits all parties. In the meantime students will get used to textbooks as eBooks, but for the time being only in English.

Endnotes

1. eLib produces and distributes eBooks. eLib is one of the biggest companies in the world that distributes eBooks with copy protection. eLib is owned by the publishers Natur och Kultur and Fintförlaget and the Internet bookstore AdLibris. URL: http://www.elib.se/
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