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The Changing Landscape of Course Content: Electronic Textbooks and Electronic Coursepacks

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Abstract

This fall, Michigan State University (MSU) implemented electronic textbook (eText) and electronic course pack pilot projects. Faculty and over 1,000 students in several pilot courses used either eTexts from one of two major publishers or faculty generated electronic course packs. All course content was accessible through MSU's course management system via the Courseload platform. Courseload offers searching, highlighting, note taking/annotations, sharing, printing, and the ability to embed and add other electronic content, user statistics, and more.

This paper describes these pilots in detail and provides readers interested in eTexts and electronic course packs an overview of one university's experiences from initial planning to implementation and assessment. The central role of the MSU Libraries as part of the planning and implementation team for both pilots is discussed, as are the specific tasks executed by the MSU Libraries. Research plans and procedures, accessibility issues, and future considerations and plans are also outlined.

Pilot Background

In early 2012, MSU began planning an eText pilot for the Fall 2012 semester. MSU's Office of the Provost initiated and funded the eText pilot, with the administrative leadership of the Associate Provost for Academic Services and the Vice Provost for Libraries and Information Technology Services (who is also MSU's Chief Information Officer). MSU's decision to pursue a test of electronic textbooks stemmed largely from the growing momentum and experimentation of eTexts in higher education, particularly by universities from the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), and the desire to influence the evolving eText marketplace in a positive direction for students and faculty.

MSU decided to work with two eText publishers for the Fall 2012 eText pilots: McGraw-Hill—through MSU's participation in the Fall 2012 Internet2/EDUCAUSE eText pilot, and Cengage—because a MSU course using two Cengage texts expressed interest in participating. All eText courses at MSU used the Courseload platform to view and mark-up eTexts, which were accessible through MSU's course management system, ANGEL. Courseload offers searching, highlighting, note taking/annotations, sharing, and the ability

to embed and add other electronic content, user statistics, and more. Both publishers allowed printing directly from Courseload and offered students the option to purchase print-on-demand versions at a reduced price. Access to McGraw-Hill eTexts through the Internet2/EDUCAUSE pilot was limited to the duration of the Fall semester while MSU negotiated 2 years of access for the course using Cengage texts. For the Internet2/EDUCAUSE pilot, MSU paid a flat fee to Internet2/EDUCAUSE that covered all publisher (McGraw-Hill), platform (Courseload) and presumably administrative costs, for up to 800 students or 20 course sections, whichever was met first. Institutions in the Internet2/EDUCAUSE pilot could also add an unlimited amount of faculty generated, or faculty authored, content at no additional charge. For the course using the two Cengage texts, MSU paid a per-student fee that included the price of the two textbooks as well as the Courseload platform fee.

Six MSU courses with a total of 15 sections participated in the fall eText pilot. Four courses used electronic textbooks: an undergraduate advertising course, an undergraduate social sciences course, an undergraduate telecommunication course, and a graduate nursing course. The telecommunication course used two electronic textbooks from Cengage,

while the three other courses used one McGraw-Hill electronic textbook each. Two other undergraduate courses, an accounting course and a science for educators course, also participated in the fall eText pilot, as they were both using faculty generated course packs. Approximately 1,300 students were enrolled in these six courses, which were taught by 16 faculty members and teaching assistants.

Role of MSU Libraries

The Office of the Provost asked the MSU Libraries to serve as the operational lead for the eText pilot. Assisting with the eText pilot seemed like a very natural role for the Libraries, due to its experience and expertise in related areas. Libraries have extensive knowledge of publishers and vendors, licenses and terms of use, copyright issues, and payment and pricing. It was noted that the MSU Libraries' philosophy of protecting the University by minimizing risk in these areas and its steadfast commitment to securing the lowest possible cost for library users would be quite valuable for planning and executing the eText pilot. Additionally, the MSU Libraries' advanced understanding of electronic content, including databases, electronic books, electronic journals, electronic course packs, and more, would carry over very well to eTexts. Finally, the MSU Libraries' strong commitment to providing service, information, and instruction to MSU students and faculty was viewed as a major strength for the eText pilot.

Two librarians, the Senior Associate Director of the MSU Libraries and a health sciences librarian, were charged with coordinating and executing various tasks that came along with the Libraries serving as the operational lead of the eText pilot. Some of the major tasks included:

- Communicating with publishers about eText terms, pricing, and contracts and with MSU's General Counsel to ensure all terms and contracts were acceptable;
- Working with MSU's purchasing office to ensure purchase orders and payments were submitted in a timely manner;
- Identifying and recruiting faculty members and courses interested in participating in the eText pilot (based on textbook publishers as well as faculty members' interest in and commitment to engaging with and utilizing eTexts in their teaching);
- Communicating with Courseload, the eText platform provider, about various issues and to receive training on using the platform;
- Educating faculty and students in eText pilot courses about the pilot specifics and training faculty and students how to best utilize the eTexts and their features;
- Working closely with MSU's Information Technology (IT) Services on course management system integration and related issues;
- Regularly communicating and working with MSU's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities office about eText accessibility issues and concerns (specifically related to eText platforms and how publishers are supplying eText content);
- Providing training to the MSU Libraries' Distance Learning Services unit, which served as the 24/7 helpdesk for eText questions and problems;
- Working with MSU's Office of the Registrar to post eText information in the course registration system and to set and confirm enrollment caps;
- Coordinating MSU's eText research study (drafting and submitting IRB applications, consent forms, and instruments, distributing surveys and conducting interviews, data collection and analysis, and reporting findings);
- Updating the Associate Provost for Academic Services and the Vice Provost for Libraries and Information Technology Services/Chief Information Officer on any major eText operational issues or developments; and
- Learning about and keeping current with the evolving eText marketplace.

Research Plans

In order to evaluate and assess the eText pilot, MSU decided to conduct an eText research study. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into eText pilot students' and faculty members' experiences and satisfaction with eTexts (compared to print textbooks), to measure how much eTexts and eText features were used and users' experiences/satisfaction with these features, and to examine attitudes about costs associated with possible future eText implementation. Two IRB applications were submitted, one for student surveys and one for faculty interviews. Both were accepted and deemed exempt. Because MSU is participating in the Internet2/EDUCAUSE fall eText pilot, it decided to participate in the collaborative baseline research group organized by Internet2/EDUCAUSE. All institutions in this group will use the same core set of questions for both the student surveys and faculty interviews. In addition to the core set, MSU also decided to add a couple of additional questions—one based on eText pricing and another about comparing eTexts to print textbooks.

Student surveys will be distributed in late November and early December 2012. Paper surveys will be used whenever possible, but some students, especially those in online sections, will receive and complete an electronic survey via Survey Monkey. Faculty interviews will take place in November and December 2012. In addition to data collected from student surveys and faculty interviews, researchers will look at usage data and statistics provided by Courseload, the eText platform being used in the pilot.

Accessibility Issues

Early on in the eText planning process, the MSU Libraries began working with MSU's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities (RCPD). The director of RCPD worked with MSU's Office of the Registrar to identify students enrolled in eText pilot courses who were also registered with RCPD. The director sent these students a message describing the pilot and encouraging any students

with questions and/or concerns to contact RCPD so special accommodations could be made. Right before classes started, the eText operational leads e-mailed all students in eText pilot courses to provide information and logistical details about the pilot. This e-mail included a RCPD/accessibility section, again encouraging any concerned students or those with questions to contact RCPD. Other than one student who contacted RCPD asking how to obtain a print copy of the eText, no requests for help or special accommodations were received. It is important to note that, by chance, no blind or visually impaired students were enrolled in eText pilot courses.

At the start of the Fall semester, the eText operational leads from the MSU Libraries met with the director and other employees at RCPD to test and evaluate the Courseload platform. When this group tried to view an eText and use Courseload's interactive features using screen reader software, it became very apparent very quickly that there were major issues. While the screen reader software was able to pick up some text from the navigation menu and a few notes, the actual eText was invisible to the software. This was obviously a huge problem that caused MSU great concern.

Around the same time, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) sent a reminder of a *Dear Colleague Letter* (from the US Department of Education and the Department of Justice) to Internet2, EDUCAUSE, Courseload, and McGraw-Hill, cc'ing all presidents of universities participating in the Fall 2012 Internet2/EDUCAUSE eText pilot. This letter stated that the eText pilot violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, because the Courseload platform and the eTexts from McGraw-Hill were not fully accessible. The NFB requested that the pilot project immediately cease. Although Internet2, EDUCAUSE, Courseload, and McGraw-Hill all issued replies stating their strong commitment to accessibility, the NFB letter understandably caused institutions participating in eText pilots, including MSU, great concern and illuminated the fact that eText publishers and platforms have a long way to go in terms of accessibility.

Future Considerations and Plans

MSU has a strong commitment to accessibility issues and to providing equal educational experiences and opportunities to all students. Therefore, MSU's eText future is quite uncertain due to the significant accessibility concerns surrounding eTexts. As of November 2012, it seemed unlikely that MSU will participate in

future eText pilots unless platforms and content are deemed completely accessible. The operational leads of MSU's Fall 2012 eText pilot do plan to continue working closely with MSU's Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities to test the new version of Courseload, which will be released before January 2013, as well as the CourseSmart platform.