eBooks at Western Michigan University: A Case Study

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eBooks at Western Michigan University: A Case Study

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Background

Western Michigan University (WMU) enrolls nearly 28,000 students and is ranked by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the category of Doctoral/Research Universities-Extensive. Western offers one hundred fifty-one undergraduate programs, seventy at the Master’s level, two specialist programs, and thirty Doctoral degrees. In addition to the main campus, Western operates eight regional centers serving many remote users with no physical library for their immediate use; making the collection development of electronic resources critically important.

The University Libraries of Western Michigan University make available to students, faculty and staff over 150,000 electronic books contained in a variety of eBook collections. Links to these collections are provided through the libraries’ Website with the majority of titles being cataloged and available through the OPAC. Most of these titles were selected as part of entire collections or sub-collections with the remainder selected by title.

Some of the eBook collections and services offered by University Libraries include:

1) The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) E-History Books Collection containing significant and frequently cited history books published from the early 20th Century through the present day;

2) The ebrary “Academic Complete” collection offering access to over 19,000 eBooks from over 180 academic, trade and professional publishers;

3) Early English Books Online (EEBO) a growing database standing now at over 100,000 digitized facsimiles of books published in England between 1475 and 1661;

4) Gutenberg-e, a small collection of digital monographs in the field of history;

5) Project Gutenberg, a collection of public domain e-texts;

6) National Academies Press, a collection offering over 3,000 freely available e-texts and a smaller sub-collection of titles available for purchase in PDF format;

7) netLibrary, a collection of thousands of titles from multiple publishers, covering many disciplines.

These collections will be examined from several different angles:

1) Acquisition and access, 2) Cataloging, 3) eBook Applications, 4) Usage, 5) User Satisfaction, and 6) Disappointments and Successes.

Acquisition and Access

The ACLS E-History Books Collection is a subscription database with a site license currently offering over 900 titles, which can be browsed or searched. ebrary offers a subscription model with the subscribing institution leasing access to the collection for a period of time (in our case three years) providing a site license for unrestricted access. eBooks from ebrary require the patron to download their proprietary reader and also allow the patron to personalize a bookshelf featuring bookmarks, annotations and highlights. Additionally, ebrary makes available publisher branded databases from Byron Hoyt, Datamonitor, Dun & Bradstreet, Harris Infosource, and the Society of Manufacturing Engineers. Early English Books Online is a purchased collection allowing unrestricted access for authorized users that can be searched or browsed. Gutenberg-e is a subscription database with a site license. Titles available on Gutenberg-e are linked from their home page. Project Gutenberg offers free access to almost 14,000 titles that may be searched or browsed. What we make available to our patrons from Project Gutenberg is freely available titles (approximately 3,000), but about one-third of their portfolio (approximately 900) is available for a fee in PDF format. netLibrary sells individual eBooks and larger collections. University Libraries has acquired over 19,000 titles largely through the consortial purchase of mutually agreed upon collections of eBooks but also by individually selecting titles, primarily for electronic reserves. netLibrary allows patrons to search the collection and read online without a personalized account, but to “borrow” patrons must create that account. netLibrary restricts access to a single user for a given title, so when an item is “checked out” only that particular individual may view it. The purchase of multiple copies is needed to circumvent this restriction.

All of these publisher Websites are linked through the Libraries’ home page. Most of the individual titles are cataloged with the 856 links passing through a proxy server.

Cataloging

Cataloging records have been provided for most major eBook collections adding value to the collections by providing an additional access point in the online catalog. Records for each eBook collection include unique leaders to be written for the Library’s ILS. The involvement of a systems librarian, programmer, and cataloging librarian are necessary to prepare the records. ILS constraints on the number of records that could be loaded at one time imposed an additional delay in loading the records into the online catalog.

Perhaps the most difficult problem yet to be resolved is the quality of the cataloging records. This problem is not vendor specific. The quality of the records provided by all eBook vendors has been questioned by many cataloging librarians. The lack of quality and authority control creates a strong resistance to adding eBook records to the catalog. Though some collections such as netLibrary eBooks allow for adjustments prior to record production, most eBook collections do not provide this option and require more manipulation at the local level.

Revision of cataloging records on a local basis continued on page 53

Google’s efforts will definitely be a good thing for libraries and content providers alike, but both libraries and content providers would do well to continue to ensure that any user, whether they come from Google, the OPAC or anywhere else, will be able to find what they need. Your average Web user can search for “Alcatraz Range” and come up with almost 4,500 results on Google, including a definition from The American Heritage Dictionary. An xrefplus user will come up with the American Heritage Dictionary definition, and can then easily link directly to entries from geography dictionaries, a browseable map from the HarperCollins Atlas, images, encyclopedia entries, and more.

In delivering electronic content, eBooks have come a long way, but there’s more work to be done. E-content users want an experience that is more than book-bound, database-bound or publisher-bound. There is a great need for comprehensive, well-organized online collections that deliver not just flat content or thousands of search results, but meaningful connections across resources that mirror the ways in which people discover and learn.

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people profile

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BORN IN AND LIVED: Cleveland, Ohio then Tahlequah, Oklahoma and currently live in Kalamazoo, Michigan.
EARLY LIFE: Sheltered in the suburbs.
FAMILY: My Mother is a recently retired public librarian.
EDUCATION: BA, Muskingum College; MAEd, Baldwin-Wallace College; and MLS, Kent State University.
FIRST JOB: Summer camp counselor.
PROFESSIONAL CAREER: John Carroll University (Reference Librarian); Northeastern State University (Education Resources Coordinator); and Western Michigan University (Education Librarian and now Acquisitions and Serials Librarian).

IN MY SPARE TIME: I enjoy wine tasting (reds, in particular) and single malt scotch.

FAVORITE BOOKS: One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest by Ken Kesey and Native Son by Richard Wright.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: I’m still working on that one.

FIVE-YEAR GOAL: Promotion to full professor.
WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see an even greater emphasis on all things delivered electronically, but I can’t foresee doing away entirely with the print volumes any time soon.

eBooks at Western Michigan University

Electronic books creates additional financial costs and significant delays in loading the records in the online catalog. Quality control and adherence to cataloging standards needs to be addressed by eBook vendors.

**eBook Applications**

As more and more institutions both public and private offer online courses through distance education, access to eBooks becomes a standard means of providing a “library.” The value of an eBook collection grows in proportion to the content provided. For Western Michigan University participation in eBook acquisitions began with a distinctly academic focus. A group purchase among Michigan academic libraries focused on subjects identified as important by the group. Since the first purchase, the group has added annually to the collection. In addition, a statewide public collection was acquired by the Library of Michigan, the state library, adding titles not included in the academic collections.

Almost all of the Michigan academic libraries participating in the group purchases offer some form of distance education. The initial collections purchased were from netLibrary and allowed one user access at a time. A circulation period was set at 6 hours for all books. To accommodate Western’s needs for titles requested for e-reserves, institutional copies were purchased as well. The e-reserve titles either duplicated the academic collections or were unique titles. E-reserve books from netLibrary were given a 2-hour circulation status. Titles from eLibrary and other eBook collections do not require circulation periods since the eBooks can be accessed by multiple users, an advantage for specific class reserves.

Both distance education needs and those of electronic reserves are well served by eBooks. eBooks can also be helpful in fulfilling reference queries. They allow the user to search an entire text quickly for information regardless of its location within the book. Computer books, which usage statistics indicate are heavily used, readily lend themselves to the user needing information on a particular process, rather than being read from cover-to-cover. In addition to the eBook collections noted above, specific reference titles from publishers such as Dekker, Elsevier, Wiley, and McGraw-Hill have been acquired to meet these user needs. Rather than acquiring entire collections, the selection of specific titles returns the subject selector to traditional collection development.

**Usage**

Not all of these collections provide usage data and several of those examined here do not provide them at all. In this particular instance, usage statistics are available on the ACLS Col... continued on page 54
Disappointments and Successes

User satisfaction seems to be highly dependent on why an eBook rather than a print book is selected. In-depth studies of user wants and needs for eBooks are yet to be done. Observations, assumptions, and occasional comments reflect a variety of views ranging from “I’d rather have a real book in hand” to “I could get the book right away and the library was closed” to “All I needed was a definition.” Where user satisfaction becomes frustration and anger is reflected in the multitude of formats and designs. The plug-ins, readers, and system designs create dissatisfaction for the user. A user in a library where OPACs are managed by the library may suddenly come across an eBook that won’t display. Western has experienced this situation when the vendor failed to notify the library that a particular publisher used a different plug-in for viewing its books. Disgruntled users are not likely to return to eBooks.

Another frustration for users and librarians is browser support. In an institution such as Western, where the library and many of its users have Macs, support for the iMac browser Safari is unavailable. More than one browser has now been installed on all OPACs enabling users to view eBooks; creating problems for management and user education as well. With the proliferation of browsers, eBook vendors need to address the issues that arise with eBook readers, plug-ins, operating systems, and other digital operations.

Screen designs for eBook use vary widely and can be confusing to user and librarian alike. Attention needs to be focused initially on where use directions such as page turns, tools for highlighting, and sign off are located. A problem in one of the designs is the location of “Close item” or “Logoff.” When an item is not closed and a user wants to go back to the book, the user is locked out of the one user book until the time limit is extended. While standardization of screen designs is not a serious problem, standardization of eBook elements could increase their value and use significantly.

The eBook, relatively new in the publishing field, requires further development to address the disappointments frustrating both libraries and end users. Libraries are looking at the variety of models offered for the acquisitions of eBooks. No perfect acquisitions model is available. From subscriptions to the one book per user model, libraries are experimenting to determine which model works best for specific collections, end uses, and budgets. Print book vendors need to offer eBooks in addition to print, giving selectors an either/or choice. At issue as well, is rights management and technology for interlibrary lending. The needs for quality cataloging, standardization, and better design stand out with all eBook products.

Many aspects of our work with eBooks have to be considered successful. Clearly, the addition of literally tens of thousands of quality titles to our collection is a major success. Purchasing electronic versions of books eliminates theft and mutilation problems. eBooks are ready application and acceptance as material for electronic reserves and can be easily accessed by remote users. Will eBooks continue to be selected for WMU’s collections? The answer is a definite yes! eBooks meet the needs of many users, provide e-reserves and references updated long before new print editions become available. The work towards standardization and possibilities of new acquisitions models promises continuing development in the world of eBooks.