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Under the Hood — E-textbooks and the Library

Column Editor: **Xan Arch** (Collection Development Librarian, Reed College Library) <xanadu@reed.edu>

I met with our campus technology team recently to discuss eBooks. The meeting didn't have a set purpose, other than discussing electronic content at the college and sharing information about library and IT projects that relate to eBooks. However, the meeting was eye-opening to me, as I realized that the technologies and products that the library uses for e-content are very different from those that are marketed to our campus technology department and those differences will make it difficult to achieve continuity for users in e-texts.

Our campus IT is interested in student and faculty access to electronic content for courses, and they believe that campus use is trending heavily toward mobile devices, particularly iPads. Their goal is for students and faculty to have a single place to read and annotate electronic course content. Accordingly, they are investigating a number of e-reader and textbook management software packages for iPad. Apple's recent release of iBooks2 is one interesting entry into this market, and there are companies appearing all over the place that are trying to fill this niche. These companies focus on the campus textbook market and provide a place to purchase, read, and annotate that material.

I was surprised to find that I hadn't heard of these products, though they are involved in hosting and supplying e-content, just like the eBook providers used by the library market. Some of the products mentioned were OpenClass, Kno, Inkling, and CourseLoad. OpenClass is a free product provided by textbook giant, Pearson. It's primarily a course management system that will soon provide the ability to purchase and read eBooks from Ingram's VitalSource. Kno, CourseLoad, and Inkling are platforms for purchasing and reading textbooks, with features like social tools and image manipulation to make the books more interactive. Inkling is



iPad only, while the other three work on computers as well.

The main reason I hadn't heard of these companies in the library context is because they host and supply textbooks marketed toward the end user, to purchase or rent, so they most directly impact the business of our campus bookstore. However, if the goal is a seamless user experience for reading and annotating course content, the library will have to be involved as well.

The **Reed College Library** has a brisk business in print course reserves, and we are starting to supplement this with electronic course reserves. A few of these course readings are textbooks, but the vast majority are other academic publications, including novels and graphic works. We have found that a large proportion of these works are accessible through our main eBook platform, so we frequently purchase an eBook copy to accompany the print copies. We are still evaluating the uptake of these reserve eBooks, while we work to make them more easily discoverable. Assuming we will continue to move course reserves towards electronic format, we will not be able to maintain a single platform approach. At this point, no eBook provider has complete coverage of the market, so as professors request books that are not provided by our main platform, we will need to enter into new contracts to supply this other material.

The most obvious conflict between what our campus IT would like to do and our current environment is one of content. The course and textbook management products, and their available content, are aimed at providing textbooks, while our institution, like many, assigns a much greater variety of class readings.

If no library eBook provider is able to cover the full range of desired course materials, it's hard to see how these other course and textbook management products will do so. However, while a student may not be able to purchase all the readings for a class on

a single platform, I can imagine a workable system where a syllabus in one of these course or textbook management products links out to more than one platform (library-provided or otherwise), as well as providing textbooks that appear natively in the product.

Annotation of material is much more problematic. Some eBook providers allow PDF downloads of content that can be imported into, and annotated in, most reader apps, including several of the textbook and course management products I've mentioned. However, several of the major library eBook providers require downloads in Adobe Digital Editions format and reading apps that will support that platform. This is moderately painful to users in its current form, but certainly more so if these eBooks will not work with the course management and e-reading platforms that are gaining in popularity. If the download options are only Adobe Digital Editions or another non-PDF file format, or, as is sometimes the case, the provider only allows content to be "checked out" for a period of time, the content cannot be saved and annotated in the same place as content appearing in the course or textbook management software. As many of the complaints with the **Kindle** campus pilots centered on the inability to easily annotate readings, the issue of annotation has to be considered as a priority for course e-texts. Managing annotations on multiple platforms will make the reading experience much more complicated for students.

For some academic environments, these pressures will not be as problematic. For schools whose classes primarily read textbooks, these new products may be able to consolidate readings effectively. Likewise, many academic libraries do not have an extensive course reserve program, and so the disconnect between purchased material through a textbook product and materials available for library borrowing will not be an issue. However, most colleges and universities encourage their students and faculty to read outside of the course materials, for term papers or projects or just to understand more about a discipline. These supplementary readings, usually coming from the library, will have to clear the same hurdles as course texts if students want to manage them along with their regular assigned readings.

So what's the answer? At this point, managing expectations may be the best first step; the growing diversity of players and needs in this market will make it very difficult to consolidate course readings on a single platform without compromising the free choice of class materials. Over time, working with vendors and publishers to find ways for library-purchased content to be more easily uploaded to course and textbook management systems will allow not just the move to campus-wide e-content systems, but the ability for students and faculty to choose for themselves the best way to read, save, and annotate content. 🍌

Pelikan's Antidisambiguation from page 63

ing its stately way down our beautiful campus streets, but upon the cell phone taking a video of the event. The truth be told, they never actually saw the thing with their own eyes! Instead, their focus was on the tiny screen as they watched their videos for the first time — while shooting them. They never even thought about it. It was their first instinct.

I don't condemn this, but I think it worth noting. And although I can't prove it, and

must be cautious in how emphatically I assert it, I think that the technology fundamentally changed the way that entire population experienced that event.

So let's be cautious, a little circumspect, in the face of the traveling medicine show that is today's technology marketplace. Let's keep trying to innovate. Let's support open standards and tools that permit us to migrate content forward as platforms come and go (and they will). And when appropriate, let's each be the kid who spoke the truth about the emperor's new threads. 🍌