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# Dispatches from the Digital Front: Student Attitudes, Digital Content, and Lessons Learned

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# Dispatches from the Digital Front: Student Attitudes, Digital Content, and Lessons Learned

by **William Chesser** (Vice President, Business Development and Global Markets, VitalSource, VitalSource Technologies, Inc.; Phone: 919-755-8100) <william.chesser@ingramcontent.com>

No one doubts that students live increasingly digital lives. Devices are ubiquitous and “screen time” continues to rise. Schools and campuses are wired, courses are online, and distance education opportunities are exploding at every level. A generation of learners today is more likely to think of “libraries” as online portals for accessing collections and searching databases than quiet halls for study, exploration, research, and reflection.

As pervasive as technology is in students’ lives, however, data suggests the technology students are finding in their schools and universities is in their view not on par with what they find in the rest of their lives. A student needing information in school today is as likely as not to ask her phone for the answer — literally.

What is particularly surprising, however, is that despite the volume and the near ubiquity of digitally-consumed content in students’ overall lives, that key cornerstone of learning, the textbook, has been surprisingly resistant to the digital transition. In spite of an almost universal belief that textbooks in print have become unsustainably expensive, and digital versions have the potential to be both cheaper and more engaging, the digital textbook has been undeniably slow to catch on in terms of market share. Digital options are now widely available, and the combination of better engagement and lower costs seems like an obvious win/win. So, why have they not universally taken hold?

We believe an emerging body of data suggests the answer, and it is not the simplistic view “students simply prefer print” that has been so often repeated in the industry press.

In our work at **VitalSource**, we visit and consult with schools, colleges, universities, and corporations around the world, helping them find the most effective means for distributing and consuming educational content. To date, large-scale digital textbook programs have made modest gains, but where they have taken hold, we have largely been part of those implementations. We support the largest digital textbook programs in the world — many consisting of tens-of-thousands of students and a few consisting of hundreds of thousands — and we see and hear examples everyday of what it takes to implement a successful digital textbook program. Because of this access, we are in a unique position to observe factors affecting digital textbook consumption: we see what is effective and what is not.

Additionally, five years ago we began commissioning an annual study on student attitudes toward technology and content in education. The study, implemented each year by an independent research organization, the Wakefield group, has been tracking student attitudes

toward devices, connectivity, and content. The survey has become something of an annual tradition in the market — suggesting areas of concern as well as illustrating and confirming trends — and while it focuses on higher education, many of the lessons also apply to other sectors. This year, we extended the research to include a similar survey conducted by **Shift Media** in the UK in order to begin to correlate attitudes in that market, as well. We at **VitalSource** are proud to play a small part in the ongoing development of this research. Not only does it form an important longitudinal body of data for universities, colleges, and content providers to use as they plan for their futures, we use it internally in our company as a correlation point for what we see happening on campuses, online, and in classrooms. It has become a guide and a goalpost as we continue to work with institutions, publishers, and booksellers around the globe to implement more efficient, effective, and universally accessible digital tools.

This year’s version of the **Wakefield** study, which surveyed 500 students from throughout the United States and was released earlier this summer, demonstrates for higher education students the “shift” to digital can no longer really even be called a “shift.” Rather, it is a *fait accompli* in most aspects of their lives. The **Shift Media** study in the United Kingdom has similar findings.

First, the studies confirm the wide-spread use of mobile devices. Ninety-nine percent of students report owning some type of mobile device. Students in this year’s study admit they can only go, on average, 48 minutes without looking at a screen; that compares to an average of 60 minutes in 2015. In contrast, students express dissatisfaction with the level and quality of their current campus technology. One-in-five students expresses strong dissatisfaction with their institution’s classroom-related tech, with only 22 percent saying they were completely satisfied. In the 2015 study, more than half of the students reported earning better grades in online courses, but this year, interestingly, that figure has actually fallen a full 10 points to 41 percent. Digital content is a near constant in students’ personal lives, but campuses and learning resources are not keeping up.

At the same time, content costs in general are an ever-increasing cause for dismay, and some of the survey findings related to how students are dealing with those costs are particularly concerning. In fact, more than 70 percent of respondents say they have “delayed purchasing course materials” due to cost, and *more than a third* say cost made them go without their materials all together. Most con-

cerning of all, though, is the fact that, according to the survey, 45 percent of these students also report they believe they had *lower success rates* in their courses due to having to forgo or delay access to materials. More than half of respondents who struggled to buy materials and who are also from lower income families report they believe their grades suffered because they had to make course content sacrifices. Just to be clear, this is not a digital issue. This is grades suffering — student success being compromised — because students are being forced into bad choices due to the cost of *any* version of their content — and today that mostly means print options. This is the problem the industry conveniently likes to ignore when it reports on survey results that say students “prefer” print over digital. Students may not be entirely happy with their digital options yet, but they are in no way happy with their print options either. In fact, issues with print options appear — based on the data above at a minimum — to be materially, demonstrably impacting student performance in a negative way. This is a baseline of data that is simply never referenced when articles are published about students “not liking” digital versions of content.

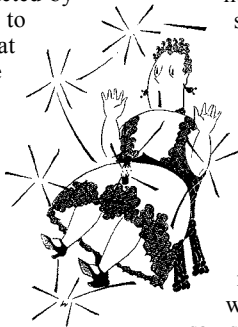
Of the respondents who say cost was a challenge, more than half say they purchased older, potentially out-of-date version of materials; nearly half say they had to get a job to help pay for textbooks; 46 percent report trying to share materials with other students; 44 percent use financial aid money.

One shudders to imagine the future doctor, dentist, or accountant who felt forced to forego her professional course content due to costs.

On a surprising, and in my opinion rather encouraging note, students in these surveys appear to understand they might be well served by increasing their purchasing leverage. More than three-out-of-four students say they believe it would be a good idea to roll course material costs into tuition and fees to increase buying power. Sadly though, 47 percent also believe their institution has rules prohibiting this practice and 17 percent do not know. Seventy-four percent of surveyed students in the U.S. feel their institutions would, if they included the cost in fees, be able to negotiate the best pricing on materials.

It therefore appears that students are significantly sensitized to both the problem of course-material costs on the one hand and the problem of not having quality, timely access to their materials on the other. Again, on the surface digital product — which historically costs substantially less than print and which

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can be accessed instantaneously on the Web or by download — seems an obvious solution.

Professors appear to understand this. A surprising 92 percent of student respondents say they have had professors recommend digital versions of texts and course materials in their classes.

So again, the question is why is the take-up of digital alternatives still seen by the market as sluggish? We believe these studies suggest an answer.

The findings in these studies seem to suggest that proffering a simple digital alternative is not enough. The nature of the product matters, and when students are asked about what they want and expect from digital product, they quickly identify that it needs to be more than a picture of the book.

Replacing a static print text with a static e-text option does not meet students' expectations. Eighty-seven percent report in these surveys that they believe they will get better grades if they have interactive course materials versus traditional textbooks, and they know what features they want:

- the ability to take self-quizzes to check understanding while reading (63 percent)
- options for actively keeping track of what has been learned (57 percent)
- the ability to make, search, and share digital notes, flash cards, and highlights (55 percent)
- the ability to set study goals and track progress (52 percent)

Additionally, it is clear from responses that online/offline use options remain critically important. Of respondents who had used digital textbooks, nearly a third read them offline (downloaded onto devices), more than a quarter read them online through active internet connections, and nearly half report making use of both online and offline access. Eighty-seven percent of respondents say digital textbooks are *not worth the money* if they cannot be viewed offline.

For this generation of learners, when content moves onto digital devices there is a foundational expectation of richness, interactivity, and access options. The market has for the most part not met these expectations.

For years, the press did predict digital textbooks were coming to sweep away the print, but more recently that narrative has flipped. The impending death of the digital textbook at hands of print has been a common narrative over the last few years. While we agree that the print textbook has been stubborn, I reject the notion this stubbornness is based on a basic user preference for the ludicrously expensive ink-on-pulp experience. Love of print textbooks has not been the cause of students' resistance to digital alternatives.

The blame for that lies in the limitations of poorly executed products and the artificial limitations these materials have put on student learning. The common refrain of "students just don't seem to like the digital as much" isn't true and the data proves it. The truth is, "students just don't like bad digital."

As many companies rushed to the market to gain a share of print's sure-to-be crumbling monopoly, a "race to the bottom" cost-wise broke out. We understand cost is an important factor for students — and affordability is one of the pillars of **VitalSource's** mission — but it cannot be the only concern.

The push for the lowest possible cost led to inferior products. Digital content, as it was originally made available to the market, was often no more than pictures of the print equivalent. At best it was an exact screen-view representation of the print. At worst, it was a duplicate of the print with copy and usage restrictions applied. As students became more digitally savvy and began using much more sophisticated technology in other parts of their lives, the digital textbook, as originally presented, became more lacking vis-à-vis its ability to meet the rising expectations and needs.

How do we know this?

Well, the students are telling us. They know what they like about digital texts: convenience and price, and they know the features they want: interactivity, self-quizzing, flash cards, rich media, analytics, and other engagement tools. They want affordable, easy-to-use

tools that make collaboration and sharing with classmates and instructors not only possible, but easy. As mentioned earlier, 87 percent feel their grades would be better with those features embedded in their digital books.

But the reality is the digital textbooks they have known and used in the past have not offered these features, so if presented with the option between paper and a digital "paper-under-glass" textbook, they choose paper, because it is familiar. All things being equal, the traditional text will win.

But today, things are not equal. Digital textbooks are beginning to have the things the students want — the quality of content, level of interactivity, media richness, study aid features, and analytics — that correlate to satisfaction and provide value to students' educational experience — exponentially more value than a traditional textbook and at a more affordable price. Companies like ours are working very hard to make the addition of media and interactivity easy and cost effective for content providers.

We have never believed the argument that students somehow favor print products because they are more productive or effective tools for learning. At best, print textbooks are the devils they know. In my nearly 20 years in this market, I have never once heard a student wax nostalgic about the romantic smell of a calculus book or the warm prospect of curling up in the bed with an Oral Pathology textbook. You hear printers say these things; you hear print-supply chain people say it, but not this generation of students. The challenge holding back digital adoption is not that digital is somehow inherently inferior to print; it is the digital products that have come into the market thus far have predominantly been conceived as no more than pictures or weightless versions of the print alternative. Nothing has been done to take advantage of the digital environment. In fact, in most cases, pains have been taken to inject usage barriers into the experience so it is even harder to use than print.

Based on our experience, echoed by the survey data, it is obvious students remain hungry for digital products. It is incumbent upon us to provide them with the products that meet their needs. Up to this point, we, as an industry, cannot say we have fulfilled that goal. 🐾

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## From Alexander Street to the Classroom

by **Bennett Graff** (Publisher, Music and Dance Collections, Alexander Street, a ProQuest Company; Phone: 203-494-7018) <bgraft@astreetpress.com>

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**O**n June 22, 2016, **ProQuest** announced its acquisition of **Alexander Street**. As the news rolled out, librarians sat up a little straighter and took note: something was afoot in the marketplace, and this acquisition was a signal.

I should know. I work for **Alexander Street**.

What's afoot is a recognition among large content providers to academic libraries of how much has changed in the ways students learn — and how far ahead of the curve small companies like **Alexander Street** were in their efforts to differentiate themselves in the marketplace from such text-driven giants as **Gale**, **Ebsco**, and **ProQuest**.

In the world of library content providers, what's on offer usually chases changes in technology, business model, budgets, generations, and pedagogical habits and expectations. The digital universe for learning has broadened dramatically, with the once standard offering of bibliographies, abstracts, and indexes — all still with us — sitting side-by-side today with aggregations of full-text content in various formats, still image collections, audio and video materials, and even fully interactive materials from online testing tools to shareable and customizable user-created content platforms.

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