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From Alexander Street to the Classroom

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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. 🐼

From Alexander Street to the Classroom

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

On 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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Where to Begin?

When **Alexander Street Press** was founded, its start-up size required that its first content offerings catch the attention and meet the needs of academic librarians sufficiently well to let them to take a chance on so small an operation. In corporate lingo, **Alexander Street's** mission was to deliver a new kind of value — and the value it delivered early on was semantic indexing. At a time when larger content providers were beginning to explore the ways costs could be saved by automating the creation of indexes and abstracts that stood at the front end of any search activity, **Alexander Street** took a step not so much backwards as to the side and ahead by bringing to online databases a type of indexing of full text materials threatened by automation. In brief, it doubled down on the application of human intelligence, by asking its indexers to look at the discipline-specific requirements of the content scholars studied. For scholars and students of anthropology, you could thus look up materials by “cultural group,” in fashion studies by the “garment discussed” or “fashion event,” in dance by “choreographer,” in theater studies by “production company,” in psychology by “methodology,” and other categories for its other disciplinary specialties, from food studies to engineering.

This customization at the disciplinary level contrasted with the bland homogenized indexing that left keyword or full-text searches to do the work of tracking down those garments and choreographers. It was an enormous benefit to the researcher and more than fulfilled **Alexander Street's** espoused purpose of deepening and enriching the research experience.

Beyond the Textual Event Horizon

What was particularly compelling about semantic indexing was not merely its contribution to the research experience, but what it did for the undergraduate classroom experience. Unlike seasoned scholars — faculty members, postdocs or advanced graduate students who largely knew what to look for because of their time-honed research background — the undergraduate student, when faced with a classroom assignment that pushed up against her ignorance of a discipline, couldn't help but be flummoxed by those age-old term paper questions: “Where do I start?” “What do I write about?” While semantic indexing in and of itself didn't answer these questions, it did grease the wheels for decision-making, so that students in an introductory psychology class tasked with writing on a “presenting condition” could quickly isolate critical information or, if at a complete loss about where to start, then select a topic from a drop down list of primary sources for research on catatonia or cutting.

Through semantic indexing, **Alexander Street** offered its answer to the question of how students conducted their research. But it wasn't long after the company's start that it also sensed a dramatic shift in what kinds of content students — and researchers — sought. In the history of media, as audiovisual materials got ever closer to the consumer — from the movie theater and the concert hall to the television and radio to the VCR player and Walkman to the personal computer and the cloud — educational market players sought new ways to bring this new content in these “closer-to-you” formats to students and scholars. For library markets, **Alexander Street** proved small enough and ambitious enough to serve as an early adopter, bringing aboard the early online music service Classical International in 2004 and moving on to incorporate video products in recognition of the reality that there was simply no other content provider serving the academic library market. In the world of music streaming services, other than **Rhapsody** — now **Napster** — online streaming services like **Spotify**, **Google Play Music**, **Groove**, and **Tidal** did not emerge till after 2007. **YouTube** itself launched in 2005, and **Alexander Street Press** itself was not far behind with its first video streaming product in 2007.

Now What Do I Do?

Alexander Street was the rare, although not necessarily unique, animal in bringing multimedia content to its users. In many respects, it contributed to the realization that Millennial students are not only far

more voracious consumers of information from audiovisual formats, but they interact with it differently as well, far less passively, if you will, than those of us raised on network television and FM radio. Teaching and research are by their nature interactive in the tracking down, absorption, selection, and re-presentation of content from multiple sources. **Alexander Street** made a critically significant decision in response to its customers' requests to create multimedia products when it offered from the outset a common platform *across media formats*, all the while applying to these objects the same semantic indexing that had distinguished its first text products.

But for students and faculty assembling content for their courses and those who look beyond the textbook or coursepack or e-reserve, it is not enough to have the content online, indexed, and searchable. In a world where distance learning has taken root, MOOCs abound, and learning management systems for on-campus and remote learning are standard, the ability to bring **Alexander Street** content into the classroom reflects business requirements that continue to push the boundaries of how content is used. The first questions that librarians and patrons continue to ask are: “Is this the right content for the targeted user?” and “Is the content accessible?” Now the question of “What can I do with this content?” has pushed its way ever higher up the list of priorities.

Consider the case of music. **Alexander Street** presently carries more than 50,000 scores, over 2,000 videos comprising some 1,600 hours, 800,000 albums covering over 10 million tracks, and some 500,000 pages of reference material. For the institution that subscribes to one of our comprehensive packages, it is a given that all of this material should be searchable on a common platform, so that a search on **J.S. Bach's** “Tocatta and Fugue” will deliver into the user's hands not only a vast array of recordings, but also editions of the score, reference work entries, liner notes, and video performances.

But it's not enough anymore in this day and age for the classroom user — and especially the instructor who is deft with his learning management software — to just find content quickly. That is to say, locating content may be a necessary condition, but it may no longer always be a sufficient one. Today's librarians ask new questions of their content providers:

- Can I cite the work easily in MLA format or export it to RefWorks?
- Can I email, share, or post a link to social media?
- Can I download or print out the work?
- Can I add selections to a personal playlist?
- Can I clip out bits of audio and video for my classroom?
- By the way, does the video include synchronized transcripts?
- For the scores or photo collection, can I create a visual clip of just part of an image and blow it up?
- How many of these activities can my students perform with a mobile app on their phone or tablet?

But these questions, which presently describe many of the functions that **Alexander Street** products offer, are but the start as new questions emerge. I offer a sampling here for the brave new world emerging for the digital score:

- Does your product offer synchronized scores with the operas or classical performances my students will be watching?
- Does the score that my performance student wants to display on her iPad Pro for a recital have an autoscroll function so she doesn't have to turn pages?
- Do you have ‘live scores’ that allow me to change the key on the fly?
- Does your score product have an audio playback option so I can hear what I'm seeing since there's no recording of the piece yet?

Semantic indexing, multimedia content on a common platform, and an ever-growing number of tools that expand the ways in which we use content may well be emerging norms. How do we know this?

Did I mention that **Alexander Street** was acquired by **ProQuest**? 🐼