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Expanding Options — Promoting the Adoption of Reasonably Priced Texts that are Also Available as Library eBooks

by **Kate Pittsley-Sousa** (Education Librarian, Eastern Michigan University) <kpittsle@emich.edu>

According to economists **Carbaugh** and **Ghosh**, the original cause of high textbook prices were lack of a completely free market and concentration of textbook publishing in a few firms, although price increases were further exacerbated when the internet increased efficiency of used book sales.¹ In addition to promoting open educational resources (OER), libraries can increase student choice, lower prices, and support healthy competition in the text market by facilitating text adoptions from a wider array of publishers, sometimes aided by library eBook purchases.

Typical practice at colleges and universities in the United States is to assign specific texts, limiting student choice to methods for obtaining texts, in what format, or whether to attempt courses without texts. Low income students might purchase used texts, rent texts, read a text on library reserves, or frequently make do without the text. Open texts, such as those from **OpenSTAX**, and alternative texts, such as those from **Flatworld**, often provide students with ideal options, including both an inexpensive print version and free/low cost online access. Custom texts and loose-leaf formats present choices that ultimately harm students by reducing opportunities to sell back texts and the availability of used texts. Large textbook publishers' goal of moving toward a digital platform model, where each student must purchase access through a code or a fee added to tuition, can limit student options to either paying the fee or dropping the course. Librarians should encourage options that expand rather than limit student options.

Rising text costs have caused low income students to withdraw from courses, take fewer courses, or make do without the text, sometimes thus earning low grades or failing a course.² Although providing textbooks had not historically been seen as the library's mission, faculty librarians at **Eastern Michigan University** formed a committee in 2013 to experiment with multiple ways to ameliorate the problem, including improvements to print reserves, promotion of OER, creation of textbook alternative finding tools, faculty seminars, and other faculty outreach activities. As part of these efforts, we took steps to encourage adoption of more reasonably priced books that might also be available for purchase as library eBooks. This makes it possible for many students to purchase a print copy, while low income students may have an option to log in and use a library eBook. In addition to OER efforts, the **Eastern Michigan University**

Library Textbook Affordability Initiative promotes text adoptions from university presses, scholarly/professional associations, trade publishers, and other specialty publishers that provide high quality books at reasonable prices. Promotion efforts include both ways to make finding books from such publishers easier and an option for instructors to request a library eBook version.

We make text alternatives easier to find by providing a keyword search engine of selected publisher web sites and offering a service where librarians prepare a list of options. The scholarly publisher search was created using a free **Google** custom search app, embedded in a LibGuide. Other institutions have made use of this work by embedding our **Google** custom search code in LibGuides, by linking to a generic version of our LibGuide created to share the resource, or adapting the **Creative Commons** licensed LibGuide.³

In addition to the **Google** custom search, subject librarians offer search assistance when faculty consider alternate texts. We receive several requests a year, but not so many that the service can't fit within normal workflows. Time spent on requests varies from a few minutes to several hours. Frequently faculty state in initial requests their desire for an option where students can purchase a print text.

We provide information on OER options and on lower priced print books, available with or without the option to provide access to a library eBook.

A few specific cases illustrate our experience. In one case, a professor requested a library eBook version of a title and when that title was not available

as a library eBook, librarians quickly found an open access title well suited to course needs. A faculty participant in a textbook alternatives faculty seminar was dissatisfied with the only text available for an upper level course. We purchased several library eBooks so she could enrich her course with both OER and individual chapters from multiple eBooks. Another professor requested our help when the **McGraw-Hill** text rose in price to \$325. For this graduate course, available OER did not closely match course content, but we found several suitable books from scholarly publishers at lower prices and some were available as library eBooks. The professor eventually chose a title with a reasonable print price that was also available as a three-user library eBook. Although he still prefers the more comprehensive **McGraw-Hill** text, he did not want students to pay so much when the other

book would work reasonably well. For most instructors, we observe that once a decision is made to move away from an expensive standard text, availability of a library eBook to use as a reserves copy can become a major factor in the adoption decision.

Experiments in providing library eBook versions of titles assigned in courses were funded through two local grants. In 2014 we applied for a \$4000 technology experimentation grant through **EMU's** Faculty Development Center to acquire library eBooks for courses. We experimented with different eBook platforms that offered varying levels of access and digital rights management. Less than ideal timing of the receipt of grant funds meant that we sent eBook links to professors at mid-semester. Although by mid-semester many students would have already purchased books, statistics showed that most titles received some use by students and some received a great deal of use. This isn't surprising, as we serve many low income students, who tell us they often forego purchasing assigned books, behavior similar to that shown in Florida Virtual Campus surveys.² Library eBooks provided an option for students attempting to make it through the class without the book.

Tips sent with the links included information to moderate expectations, such as downloading and printing limitations. Where eBooks limited simultaneous users, we warned students of possible turn-aways, encouraging them to read ahead if relying solely on the eBook. Statistics did show turn-aways where limited user eBooks were busy, but these were no more frequent than delays students might expect using print course reserves. Our largely working-class Midwestern students (many of whom are studying to enter human service fields such as teaching, nursing, and social work) seem to be tolerant of the delays. We experienced very little in the way of technical problems with students using the eBooks. Previously, the most frequent problem with course eBook use occurred when professors didn't know how to provide students with a stable/proxied link; here the library provided proper links. One small problem occurred when students attempted to save eBooks as browser favorites after logging in, saving links with no login trigger. In a second grant, described in greater detail below, we provided links to the library catalog with advice that students could save the catalog page as a browser favorite.

We were interested to see whether eBooks with limited annual uses (non-linear or concurrent use model) could work. We did not run out of uses for any title during the experiment semester. We have since sometimes run out of

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uses on non-linear titles, although the database vendor sends warning messages that allow us to purchase additional copies if necessary. At EMU most classes are limited to 30 students, smaller than at some universities. We were contacted by another university planning a similar experiment and they did experience immediate problems running low on numbers of use, perhaps due to larger class sizes or more sections using the book. We encourage instructors to also place orders for print copies with the bookstore — if the other university had not done so, that might also explain the problem. For those reasons, open texts or unlimited user eBooks are a better solution for large enrollment introductory course needs, while nonlinear or limited simultaneous user library eBooks can work well as a reserves copy for upper level elective courses (where there may also be fewer OER options). We continue to be uneasy with the non-linear model and tend to purchase those only where there aren't other options, or where we expect less use such as for optional recommended course reading.

In 2015 a second \$5,000 grant from EMU's Women in Philanthropy allowed us to create an electronic form for instructors to request library eBook versions of course books. The most difficult part of the project was getting the attention of busy faculty. Some requested titles were not available as library eBooks, but it's quick to check on availability and notify requesters, while also offering to research alternatives. A survey of participating instructors showed that most faculty didn't notice a difference in student performance, but 29% thought more students completed the readings. More than half the instructors noticed a reduction in student complaints on the cost of course materials. Most instructors planned to explore using library eBooks for future course readings and more than half said they would also consider open access course materials. Of students surveyed, none reported major technical problems using the eBooks. Where minor issues (such as pages loading slowly or

turn-aways) were reported, those same students reported that they would still choose to use a library eBook again. Most students who used the eBook stated that they did so to save money, and only two thought the eBooks were more convenient. Some students shared that if the free eBook had not been available, they would not have read the book. The survey population was small (14 faculty, 27 student respondents), but results were in line with our experience from the previous grant experiment.

After two successful grant experiments, the Library faculty voted to change our long standing collection policy of not purchasing textbooks, now allowing purchases if the title was requested by an instructor and available as a library eBook. There is concern about adding textbook support to a collection budget already strained by journal subscription costs and any solution involving subscriptions would have little support. Because we didn't foresee a large number of requests from faculty, we judged those small number of one-time purchases could be managed within the library's limited collection budget. In the following years, we have purchased requested eBook titles and have set up eBook contracts with additional publishers. We've been able to fund the moderate number of requests from general collection funds. The number of titles requested and purchased has generally been less than the number of titles purchased during the grant periods (69 in 2014 and 56 in 2015). We haven't been able to support comprehensive purchasing of all course books available as library eBooks (and getting timely info on text adoptions would be difficult), but there is great value in helping students in specific courses where we can.

Since one motivation of librarians is to encourage healthy competition in the textbook industry, we should also ask: Could provision of library eBooks for courses hurt those small publishers? The revenue effects can be both positive and negative, so it would be complex to try to measure the effects. Sales effects may be no worse than using standard print reserves, perhaps less since students face printing/copying limits on most eBooks. We see that even our "born digital" students prefer to have their

own print copy of course books, so when a title is reasonably priced many students will choose to purchase the book over using the less convenient library eBook. If the instructor chose the title in part because we could provide library eBook access for disadvantaged students, the publisher gained sales. Many of the students who use the library eBook are students who would otherwise forego purchasing the text, but there would be some who would have bought the book. In many cases, the title we purchased was published several years ago with many used copies available. We are also mindful that many smaller publishers, while needing enough revenue to operate, are not solely motivated by profit. Certainly university presses, associations, and some specialty publishers might be pleased to see their eBook offerings support low-income students and the spread of knowledge in their fields.

A program to support discovery of course reading options from a wider array of publishers and to further expand student options by sometimes purchasing library eBook versions can be an effective way to immediately help some students, to offer faculty more text choices than an OER program alone, and to support healthy competition in the textbook industry. Efforts have been sustained at EMU with no dedicated OER librarian and no specific funding from the university, aside from two small grants for pilot projects. Making use of the custom search engine, offering a course readings alternative search service, and providing library eBooks for some titles may be possible for even underfunded libraries. 🌱

Endnotes

1. Carbaugh, Robert and Ghosh, Koushik. "Are college textbooks priced fairly?" *Challenge*, 48.5 (2005) 95-112.
2. Florida Virtual Campus. 2016 Student Textbook and Course Materials Survey. (October 7, 2016) <https://dlss.flvc.org/>.
3. <https://guides.emich.edu/texts/presses>.
4. Pittsley, Kate. Final Report EMU Women in Philanthropy Grant. (2016) <http://commons.emich.edu>.

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ness." Why? I realize that we must "adapt to technology" but, pardon my French, why are we throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Libraries used to be quiet places where you could hear yourself think. Are we willingly throwing that away?

Saw this article in *The Spectator* the other day. It's by **Dominic Green** and is a review of a movie called *The Bookshop*. *The Bookshop*, directed by **Isabel Coixet** of Catalonia, is about that mole-like impulse to burrow away from the world, and how the world still forces us to see ugly spectacles of human nature. Adapted

from **Penelope Fitzgerald's** novel of 1978, this is a minor-key pleasure, beautifully paced, skillfully acted, and thoroughly sad."

<https://spectator.us/2018/09/any-storm-in-a-port/>
<https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/09/any-storm-in-a-port-the-bookshop-reviewed/>

Speaking of bookstores, hear that **Barnes & Noble** is up for sale and this article caught my eye. "Amazon killed Barnes & Noble; now it should Buy It!" Hmmm...

<https://www.thestreet.com/investing/stocks/amazon-killed-barnes-noble-now-it-could-buy-it-14733932>

Does your library order through **Amazon** or through traditional companies like **GObi**?

Are you ordering more books than you once were? **Joe Esposito, Roger Schonfeld** and **Katherine Daniel** have launched **The Library Acquisitions Patterns project**. An interim report was published a few months ago. The final report should be finished by the end of the year. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog/understanding-library-acquisition-patterns/>

Textbook affordability seems to be one of the hottest topics on the **Charleston agenda** this year. There are several panels on this including one by **Joe, Gwen Evans, Mark Cummings** and **Mark McBride**!

<https://2018charlestonconference.sched.com/event/G8SM/the-librarys-opportunity-in-affordable-textbooks>

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