The Case for Online Coursepacks and E-Books

By Barry W. Birnbaum

While most universities offer online courses, the need for creating support materials that go with these courses remains an area for further exploration. Most instructors use chat rooms, PowerPoint, etc., to deliver instruction. One of the areas that is sometimes overlooked is the development of online textbooks or electronic course packs that go along with the online courses.

In order for an online course to be truly digital, all aspects of it must be converted so that the student has similar experiences within this delivery system. Although some individuals feel that a traditional textbook is more appropriate, the difference in look, feel, and quality is almost the same when electronic books are adopted. Students have an option of downloading and printing the electronic materials or of just reading the material while connected to the Internet.

The selection of articles or materials for a digital textbook is an authentic, performance-based task. This experience allows for the inclusion of real-life, real-time contextual information that can be applied to students in order to assist them in choosing learning that is more reality based. These strategies are effective in any digital delivery format.

Course packs and e-books were developed for undergraduate and graduate students who take courses online at Northeastern Illinois University, located in Chicago. These students took courses in the area of special education and were working toward certification and/or an advanced degree for pay advancement. The purpose of using this type of digital media was to make electronic course delivery as electronic as possible. Also, e-books can be updated regularly, thereby giving students newer material almost as fast as a click of a mouse.

Materials in course packs and e-books can be updated on a regular basis. While traditional textbooks in many areas are outdated once they are written, one advantage of an e-book or course pack is that up-to-date information is only a click away. This provides students with more current information than they would receive in a more traditional manner.

What is interesting is the measure of student attitudes between more traditional textbooks and those that are offered in electronic format. Most undergraduate students appear less likely to find electronic textbooks useful. In a survey

completed just last semester, these students tended to want to print the digital textbook rather than use it in its original format. These students indicated that using an e-book was cumbersome and made it more difficult to prepare for assignments or tests. They indicated that they would like the e-book available in print format and that printing the material took too much time.

On the other hand, graduate students found e-books to be easier to use and thought the maneuvering through the articles and chapters was relatively simple. They also found that it made their lives easier because they could access the e-book anywhere a computer was available. Most of these students tended to access the e-book from work or from the library, as well as from home. Less than 20% felt the need to print the contents of the e-book and preferred to use it in its original form. They found that the information was easier to read and that taking notes using a word processing program while the e-book was accessed was relatively simple.

One of the reasons for this difference may be that undergraduate students are better trained toward using traditional learning models. In some instances, these students have little experience using technology and find that most of their courses are offered on campus rather than in an alternative delivery model. While there is a push nationally to incorporate more technology into college-level classes, some institutions are slow to expose undergraduate students to the various aspects and roles computers can play in the classroom.

Most of the undergraduate students reported that they had similar responsibilities as those of the graduate students, especially when it came to family and home. The undergraduates didn't see these responsibilities as interfering with their attitudes toward e-books. The graduate students found that using e-books allowed them to work at home while meeting family responsibilities. The undergraduates did indicate that their curriculum included less technology-based learning than that of the graduate students.

Many of the graduate students are full-time teachers working toward a master's degree and have been exposed to technology in their various schools. Additionally, the faculty, according to these students, integrated technology more readily into the coursework while infusing a wider use of the Internet than reported by the undergraduates.

There are several graduate-level courses that require students to develop a PowerPoint presentation, use the Internet to gather information for research, and use the university library electronically. The same requirements for undergraduate students do not apply. Therefore, it is possible that the graduate students have a higher level of skills in the area of technology than do the undergraduates. Since the use of e-books and course packs on campus is relatively new, many students may need an opportunity to adjust to their use. As more professors begin to use digital media in the classroom, the comfort level should increase with the students. The initial hesitancy on the part of the undergraduate students may solely be based upon their limited experiences.

Developing a course pack or e-book is not difficult. There are commercial companies available that assist in the process of selection and implementation. The professor can create a course pack independently or get assistance from reference librarians that are employed by these companies. Regardless of the manner in which the process is done, copyright clearance is easily gained. There is no charge to the instructor for the development of the course pack or for the copyrighting of the material.

E-books are the wave of the future. In order to make online learning truly online, all aspects of the course should have electronic components. Students will benefit from e-books because they have instant access to a wealth of information at their hands and they will be better prepared for using technology in the classrooms.

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