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User Input: Experiences in Assigned Reading from E-Books - One netLibrary Experience

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### **Julia Gelfand**

The University of California, Irvine (UCI) Libraries [www.lib.uci.edu](http://www.lib.uci.edu) wanted to have an e-book experience to learn how users respond to the medium and the delivery mechanism. In order to have as much freedom as possible with this new effort, it was decided that the libraries would conduct a one-year calendar trial with netLibrary [www.netLibrary.com](http://www.netLibrary.com). At the submission of this article, the trial is now about over and the future of netLibrary remains uncertain, as the company suffers from lack of financial security. Nevertheless, e-books are likely to be around and libraries will continue to consider how best to incorporate them.

Many libraries have committed to e-books for many reasons. They include: library space saving; because users can obtain full content of books remotely and other convenience factors; opportunity for a choice of multiple formats to users; and ease in copying pages.

UCI decided that, in this trial, it would offer readers a variety of content, so each bibliographer selected about 40 titles in their subject areas from the inventory for a total of nearly 750 titles or about \$28,000 that was earmarked for the project. Since this was a trial, we opted for leasing the content for the duration of the project rather than licensing for perpetual access. The loan periods were for the majority of the collection set at 24 hours and for about 50 titles that were considered "reference" for four hours. For one title that was used as a course text in an enrollment of 17 students, two copies were acquired, with each having two-hour circulation periods, per the instructor. Usage statistics indicated two primary subject areas of high traffic - business and medicine. Librarians and the task force that oversaw the trial were responsible for the marketing of the project and the Catalog Department acquired MARC records for the online records of each title. Thus, access was available via a couple of ways, from the online public catalog like for any other library-held resource and from a featured list, a byproduct of the online catalog.

One instructor requested a specific title that the entire class would read. This was an undergraduate writing seminar and students were expected to use the netLibrary copy and assigned to write an essay about that reading experience. Of the 17 students, 14 submitted essays and they serve as the basis of this feature. Each of the students was given an orientation session to finding netLibrary titles in the online catalog, how to register, browse and check out the book. These observations and experiences suggest some of the limitations as well as special features of the service and what expectations users have of such products.

Students were asked to propose in their essays, written as memoranda addressed to the Library Task Force on e-books, whether such a service should be extended permanently and what kind of place e-books had in the library. Many students introduced themselves as someone who spends little time at the library, is very mobile and comfortable with a range

of technology applications and devices. It must be understood that this is not a significant sample, the netLibrary collection at UCI is limited, yet I believe there still are some insights about the trends of undergraduate reading habits and curricular development in higher education that may be useful for future decision making.

Some of the discomfort students experienced included their assumptions and perceptions about reading any kind of book - books are used when they need to read the entire volume. When only a chapter is required students seem to prefer that it be placed on e-reserves or made part of a coursepack. Restricted short loan periods do not encourage or promote e-book usage because reading online is done in brief intervals, or to make copies of the chapters, or to revisit netLibrary often to read or copy until the book is completed.

Another factor is that students usually do not study at home - most undergraduates live in crowded dormitories or in apartments with several roommates or at home with their families but claim to rarely study there. Connecting from home does not always offer high-speed access to the campus and the reading experience is compromised when it does not offer ease of use. Students prefer to study in public places, such as coffee houses or bookstores, where computers are not readily available. They do not like to carry laptops because connectivity to the campus is not guaranteed; the laptop becomes an extra worry (loss or theft.) Thus, coupled with the digital divide, the mobility issue was commonly argued by these students as well as what they described as limited accessibility. Several students also noted that when they do use computers, they are constantly deluged with distractions because their computers are connected to many things such as music, e-mail, instant messaging, games and entertainment, and other software that discourages serious reading. Thus, sitting at a computer for some is too distracting for reading. Increasingly, students are using PDAs to take notes, carry information, and these are quickly replacing pcs and laptops and not currently compatible with netLibrary products.

Economic indicators were often mentioned by the student - if the cost of the book is high (over \$50) they are more likely to be inconvenienced and check the title out several times from the library. If it is cheaper, they are inclined to want to buy the book and perhaps keep it, but usually sell it back at the end of the term for a reduced amount. This was weighed as convenience and time over economy. Most students indicated that they buy used books, and the example of the title used for this course put the cost of the book at \$16.00 and easily available from every online book vendor. Students also indicated that the cost of the title via netLibrary was significantly higher (nearly double).

Ergonomic concerns such as eye fatigue from serious reading was noted by several students. Even though they use computers a lot they are not usually engaged in such intense activity as reading and comprehension require. Constant scrolling was another issue that many students negatively brought up - they would prefer a full page on a screen.

Another expense that students complained about is printing. With the increase in campus printing to 12 cents per page, the costs of copying becomes astronomical. Most students do not have laser printers at home and really do not want to print but feel forced so that they do not have to read off a screen or wait for slow downloading.

Advantages or assets of the e-book included the appreciation for features such as a built-in dictionary, a sophisticated keyword search feature that highlights output, and other multi-media options. These were attractive to nearly every student who offered comments on this point. Another option that netLibrary has is when you download the e-book and read offline, you are able to highlight things that you may want to return to or revisit. You can also take notes on the offline e-book reader. Numerous writers shared how intuitive they found netLibrary. Some readers really found that having the clipboard function was a good resource. They also tended to appreciate the direction navigation feature from both the table of contents and the index to the text. Nearly every student commented that their favorite feature was that of automatic return. They also said that some of the value of these features vary tremendously depending on whether they are reading fiction or nonfiction.

However, there are other related problems with Netlibrary's e-books, such as the incompatibility of Netlibrary's e-book reader with Macintosh and Lynux-based servers. Because the e-book reader only works on a Windows platform, the once positively acclaimed note-taking and highlighting options, that are available only in the e-book reader software, cannot be utilized.

Readability issues were discussed by students at great length. There is less practical usability that could be utilized through this service. An important feature of a physical book is the ability to "flip the pages" and flag certain sections to be returned to in the future. netLibrary does offer a parallel feature through its browsing capabilities, but does not replace the convenience of going through the pages of a book and directly to a chapter, page, etc. for easy and quick reference, when needed. The inability of netLibrary to annotate pages with "post-it notes" or similar alternatives greatly outweighs the capacity to search via its keyword function.

Recommended proposals students offered included:

- Same loan periods as for print - at our institution, undergraduates have five-week loan periods. That may improve the access issues.
- Offer students the chance to lease the e-book for extended loans but it would have to be cheaper than buying it either in print or as it currently is priced as an e-book.
- If short loan periods are to be the norm, then a reserve function needs to be introduced or multiple copies need to be available.
- Make available via cross platforms - especially UNIX for downloading, but for Macs, Lynux, via WebTV (just around the corner for mass distribution!) and extend to PDAs.
- Maintain the special features - the dictionary, search function, FAQs of netLibrary.
- Figure a way that connectivity can be improved across a variety of connections - waiting more than four seconds for a page to load makes the reader lose interest.

Some astute students saw the assets of e-books as good for our library because of serious space constraints. Regardless, users were more preoccupied by convenience. Most students concluded their essays by noting that with modification to the local program, they would find value and would use e-books for reference but not for reading an entire volume.

I think we cannot discount the input from users or readers. This determines whether the product will survive in a technologically evolving society and economy. It seems that users want to see improvements, and they want to feel that it is an economic incentive to use e-books. Most importantly, it has to fit with their lifestyle and be convenient. If not, the choice of taking courses, or to read certain materials, will be lost. It must be remembered that these experiences are those of only a small number of students at one institution that is still learning how to offer and treat e-books. As a librarian, I think that there is more to learn and that if netLibrary survives in some form and can offer some modifications to its program, that it is still viable. Still, the fact that no reader device except a PC is needed is attractive for this academic library, but how much we continue to invest in e-books remains to be seen. Institutions would be negligent not to be concerned about the technology and economic models of this product line and hope that libraries can influence the future of e-books.

Julia Gelfand ([jgelfand@uci.edu](mailto:jgelfand@uci.edu)) is the Applied Sciences and Engineering Librarian at the University of California, Irvine, chaired the e-book Task Force there and is a co-editor of LHTN.