Somerset College: e-Books increase access and availability of library resources

Summary

Jolanta Peters, Research & Libraries Services Manager at Somerset College, has pioneered the introduction of Amazon Kindle e-book readers for the College library. Not only has this enhanced the availability of reading resources, but it has also given technology students better access to library resources. With the Kindle devices technology students can ‘virtually’ carry many books at the same time, which ordinarily would be very difficult or not possible due to the heavy weight of the books.

About Somerset College

For more than 150 years Somerset College has provided the highest standards of education and training using industry-standard facilities and resources. All of its courses are designed to meet employers’ needs, and to provide skills and knowledge relevant to work and employment.

The College provides further and higher education courses, as well as a variety of part-time courses for adult learners. Qualifications offered include NVQ, BTEC First Diploma, BTEC National Diploma, GCSE and Foundation Degree. The College is part of The University of Plymouth Colleges network.

It believes it leads the way in developing innovative teaching and learning practices for its students and staff. Its facilities are continually improving and recently it points to Genesis, Hot House, the Somerset Centre for Enterprise and the Francesco’s Graduate Hair Academy as examples of its enterprising and exciting approach to education and training.

The challenge

The library at Somerset College provides a diverse range of books and learning resources. Some of the books for certain subjects are very thick and heavy, which means that they are unwieldy for many students. Some are too big to loan out because many students have trouble carrying and transporting them, with certain types of books being reference only. This not only restricts access to the books, but also the availability of them because the library in some cases only has one copy of the book.

Jolanta decided that the library could benefit from using e-books, after a colleague suggested that they could use mobile devices in the library.
After discussion at a general meeting, Jolanta sought permission to invest in e-books, with the aim of providing the technology students with an alternative means of accessing the often substantial reading materials that they needed for their course.

One of the main challenges was to source a supplier that could provide the necessary titles required from the reading list that the Technology department had provided. After researching all the available suppliers Jolanta decided to go with Amazon, due to the availability of e-books and the reasonable price.

The library had to do a lot of planning in advance of purchasing the Kindles due to the fact that they also needed to purchase the e-books from Amazon, which can range in price from a couple of pounds up to around £30.

The library had to make sure that it kept within the technology budget and make considerations with regard to the e-books required. Once bought, the e-books can't then be transferred into their library catalogue because they are for the Kindle only.

**The activity**

Once the library had purchased the Kindle devices, staff within the Technology department provided Jolanta with lists of technology book titles that they needed, specifically related to the course materials the students required for their courses.

When Jolanta had added all the e-books to the Kindle devices she handed them out to technology staff and students to trial and use straightaway.

Two technology students, Edward Russell and Alan Bohdanowicz, were picked by Computing Lecturer Leon Glass to be involved in the project and to provide their feedback. Both students were very keen to use the Kindles and be involved.

After the students and staff had been given some time to use the Kindles, Jolanta handed out questionnaires to them in order to get feedback, which was anonymous. The kind of questions asked included:

- What did you think of the Kindle e-book reader you tested?
- Did you find the Kindle e-book titles useful?
- Which of the functions have you tested? For example highlighting text, book marking or text to speech
- What type of material would you like to read on the Kindle?
- How much text have you read in an e-book?
- Will you recommend your fellow student/colleague to borrow the Kindle from the learning resource centre (LRC)?
- Did you find reading on the Kindle screen easy?
- Is access to the library materials easier with the Kindles?
- Will you borrow the Kindle e-book reader from the LRC again?
- Further comments or suggestions

Following on from the results of the questionnaires, Jolanta was able to gauge their use and see how beneficial they had been for the students.

The College has now purchased two more Kindles to add to the four Kindles it already has. These additional Kindles will have fiction added to them and be available for all students at the College.
Jolanta has also made a Kindle available to the Dyslexia Support team to trial. This was an important factor in the purchase of the device because the College have around 300 students who have dyslexia. Faith Dethier, Learning Support Tutor, gave the Kindle to one of her students called Laura Kent, who has a rare eye condition and requires specific learning support to provide her with the equipment she needs in order to use the College equipment.

The library also have e-books available for students to download from their online catalogue, access is available 24 hours a day and this is also available through the College’s VLE (virtual learning environment). Another important factor is that the Somerset College library catalogue can also be viewed by other libraries, who can request titles, which is an income generator for the library. More importantly it helps to promote the library resources and is a good way of collaborating with other libraries should the library at Somerset College require titles.

The Amazon Kindle e-book reader, displayed within its light-weight, portable case stand

The outcomes

What is almost instantly apparent from the feedback Jolanta has received is the fact that the Kindle e-book readers have really helped to open up reading materials for technology students. They have also enabled the students to devote more time to reading and, in fact, surprisingly made reading more accessible for many students who do not get on well with reading traditional paper-based books.

Students Edward and Alan have both enjoyed using the devices and have found the flexibility and versatility of the Kindle a refreshing change.

In physical terms the Kindle weighs in at only 289.2 grams, about the weight of a small paperback book. If you think that the Kindle can
potentially store up to 3,000 titles on one device that is like having a library in your pocket. At the moment the devices being loaned out to the Technology department have around ten titles stored on them, which in comparison to physical books still means a difference in weight of a couple of stones and more!

“You can use the Kindle to access all the books in one place at the same time.” - Michelle Epstein, FdA Business & Management student, Somerset College

Jolanta can also add any e-books purchased to multiple devices, up to six Kindles can be used to add titles bought. This means that it is a significant cost saving, compared to having to buy six separate physical books.

Another factor is that, without the Kindles, Computing Lecturer Leon Glass probably would not have been able to have had many of the technology titles they have had.

“I think they have been very useful, I liked using the Kindle and it has been something that students have benefited from.” - Leon Glass, Computing Lecturer, Somerset College

For dyslexic students the Kindle has a text enlarging function, so the letters and words can be made much bigger on the screen. There is also a text-to-speech function included.

Another benefit of the Kindles is that the screen does not glare like an iPad, for example. This means that the reader's eyes will not tire in the same way. They also have very good battery power and can last without a charge for up to and over a month.

The main features of the Kindle device:

- Line spacing, so you can increase the space between words
- Text to speech
- Enlarge text easily
- Headphone input to listen to text to speech
- In-built dictionary, with a word highlighting function for word definitions, including exploring other meanings of words
- The Kindle comes with a useful cover, which opens out to make a stand
- Seamless page-turning
- Mobile devices can also use the Kindle account for access to the e-books
- For the newly available fiction Kindles at the College, the library can download from a huge selection of copyright free books
- Text is easy to highlight in the Kindle and revisit
- The device is small and easy to store

“For some students that don't like to read normal books, it could be quite useful and they might like reading more.” - Alan Bohdanowicz, Somerset College student

The Kindle cover, which also folds out into a useful stand, has been a feature that Alan has liked a lot.

“The case is excellent, it allows you to stand the Kindle beside a PC, so you work more effectively, I found this very useful.” - Alan Bohdanowicz, Somerset College student

The library has also ordered two more Kindles just for fiction, which is a good way of mixing up the books on the Kindle and offering the students alternative easy reading when they get tired of the books they read as part of their course.
The only real faults with the Kindle are that the keypad is quite small to use, which could be a barrier for blind users – unless they had help from someone to operate the device for them to access the assistive controls. Having said that, Laura Kent is learning to touch-type, so she is very used to using devices with a keyboard and did not find this a barrier for her.

Jolanta thinks that it might be good for the e-books to have more images included in the text in the future, which would make the e-books more interesting. However, Amazon has been quite clever about the dynamics of the device; not having images and other media has undoubtedly equated in a much greater battery life.

**The impact**

All the Technology staff and students that took part in the pilot group to trial the use of the Kindles have said that they found access to the library materials easier with the Kindles and all of them said that they would borrow them again. In fact, the Kindles are so in demand now that the library has had to cut the loan out period from three weeks to two weeks to enable students the opportunity to use them.

“I found the Kindle pretty intuitive to use.” - Edward Russell, Somerset College student

“I really liked it because it was easy to find all the books that you want, you can easily go to the location that you need.” - Alan Bohdanowicz, Somerset College student

The library currently has user guides on how to use the Kindles, but they are also considering running training sessions on how to use the Kindles to try and get other departments more interested in using them.

Laura Kent has really found the Kindle very useful for many reasons, not only the versatility and the assistive in-built features for accessibility, but also because the screen does not hurt her eyes at all – which is an important factor considering that other devices, such as a computer screens, do affect her eyes and cause difficulties.

“It helps with my sight impairment because I am able to change the size of the font, which I find very helpful because a lot of books I find have small fonts. Another thing I like is the fact that it helps with my dyslexia because it reads the words back to me. This makes me able to read along with the Kindle.” - Laura Kent, Somerset College student

But it is not just Laura who finds the anti-glare screen a health benefit:

“For me as a technology student I have spent most of the time in front of a PC, so it’s easy for me to have this really good e-book reader because the screen does not glare and hurt your eyes after a long day.” - Alan Bohdanowicz, Somerset College student
The Kindle’s screen does not glare like a PC and offers additional benefits for dyslexic users

Some additional feedback:

“Very good move to get Kindle e-readers. This way borrowing more than one title is made so much easier. I hope that this pilot will be implemented and the College will offer more Kindles to the LRC.” - Somerset College student

“The Kindles we hope will give another way of providing information to students, the more ways we have the better.” - Andy Hobbs, Head of Learning Technology & Learning Resources, Somerset College

“Text can be highlighted and so you can return later to find the highlighted text in the paragraph.” - Somerset College student

“It did help me with the referencing as normally I would not want to get five books at the same time.” - Alan Bohdanowicz, Somerset College student

“I would also use the Kindle if there was business specific resources available as that would be a lot easier.” - Michelle Epstein, FdA Business & Management student, Somerset College

Jolanta is also very interested in sharing practice with other libraries and to get feedback on their e-books project from the community. She would also like to find out about any other libraries that are also using e-books for college materials and is very keen to hear from anyone involved in their own e-books projects. Jolanta also found many of the Excellence Gateway case studies very useful to find out about what other providers are involved in. This has also helped to bring her into contact with other College departments and staff, in particular Faith Dethier and her work with Laura Kent and Access Apps. (Which are a suite
of assistive computer programs, aimed at helping disabled users, these are all available on a USB memory stick)

“The article was really interesting I read for the case study about Laura Kent, we are now communicating with other College departments and sharing good practice.” - Jolanta Peters, Research and Library Services Manager, Somerset College

Jolanta's advice for other learning providers interested in using e-books within their libraries:

- Not to just buy any books that are suggested, it is good to follow reading lists so that you know the material will be relevant for the students.
- We were lucky because we had involvement with the technology tutors, who were working with us in co-operation all the time, so we did not need to go and ask students about the books they needed.
- Libraries should seek the support of tutors to provide relevant reading lists if the materials are course-related otherwise they might be providing materials that will not be used.
- Look at which supplier you want to use. Amazon is very good in terms of prices and the range of books available, if you use another supplier you might find that the range of course materials are not as good.
- Libraries should determine whether they want to have the e-readers for leisure purposes with fiction or for course materials, in which case choosing the right supplier is important.
- We are now looking at working with other College departments to try and develop more interest, as we can see that the use of Kindles growing, this would potentially be of great benefit for the College as a whole.

Useful links

Somerset College
Amazon Kindle
Jisc RSC South West

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