How Much are Our Textbooks used in the Classroom?

This blog post was written by Errol Rivera.

This is one of the questions we were most excited about. It was also a question that turned out to be more challenging to answer than any of us anticipated. The sheer number of platforms on which a book can be made available, the different means of accessing, the limitations of the data kept by those places and the protection of that data all combine to determine how much you can answer a question like this.

The two titles available from UHI’s e-textbook production team, are required reading in six different modules across their university, with some overlap between them.

*How to write a Research Dissertation: Essential Guidance in Getting Started for Undergraduates and Postgraduates:*
- Applied music critique and evaluation
- Dissertation (SERRM)
- Research and dissertation skills
- Research dissertation (Sustainability Studies)

*Undertaking Your Research Project: Essential Guidance for Undergraduates and Postgraduates:*
- Archaeological Science Dissertation
- Research and dissertation skills
- Research dissertation (Sustainability Studies)
- Researching the Social World

They are also listed as recommended reading on additional modules at both UHI and Edinburgh Napier University, though those numbers have not been finalised at the time of writing this. The majority of these modules where these titles are required reading are comparably smaller in size, averaging fewer than 20 students each and some as small as five. This is likely due to their nature as research books, which are used at higher levels of study and in honours courses, of which nearly all these modules are. These titles are used not simply across modules, they are used across disciplines both in the sciences and the arts. From an evaluation standpoint, there are two major implications from this scenario. The first is that the distribution of a high level book of general skills such as these can be (and are) on par with that of a specialised etextbook for a single first or second year module. This means that their embedding in the University of The Highlands and Islands is anything but negligible. The second implication here is that as high level general skills etexts, their potential usage may only be limited by limited by nothing less than the entire number of research and dissertation modules offered by the university.

Both titles are available in the University’s library system in both electronic and hard copies, but tracking their usage has proved challenging. However, this is not necessarily a bad challenge, nor is it insurmountable for IAP evaluators. Much as the embedding of these titles are diffused across different modules, the availability of these titles are diffused across different platforms and sources. This is because the UHI production team has prioritised ease of access in the titles it produced and for the comparably low price of £1.99. This meant that the UHI production team strived to distribute
Institution as e-textbook publisher toolkit

This article is part of the Institution as e-textbook publisher toolkit: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/institution-as-e-textbook-publisher-toolkit

their books by as many means as possible. Therefore, while UHI’s e-textbooks are available in the library, the library was not the only way they made it to the classroom.

The information that the library could provide has been limited by both data protection, however we’ve been able to determine that Amazon Kindle is likely the means by which UHI’s students predominately access these e-textbooks. It’s the judgement of this evaluator that this is less of a reflection on UHI’s library system, and more of a reflection on the nature of these titles as low-priced, high-level skills etextbooks which students may see as useful not simply in academia. This is also reflected in the limited but more in depth information we’ve received directly from students and their lecturers in semi-structured interviews, regarding how they perceive these titles.

How Do Students Perceive UHI’s etextbooks?

While the majority of the embedding enjoyed by these titles has occurred at the University of the Highlands and Islands, they have also been piloted at Edinburgh Napier University. Obtaining feedback from students can be challenging for a number of reasons including privacy, time, and interest. Our research shows that once a student has established the relevance of their texts to their studies, then they are satisfied, and that relevance is determined almost solely by the lecturer. Of course, there is more to it than that. Accessibility, formatting, and quality are just some of the concepts that have an impact on how we perceive books. But they’re not always the ones students are conscious of. For an IAP evaluator, it’s easy to be overwhelmed by the number of aspects to an etextbook that influence how a student experiences them. The challenge is focusing on those aspects that students have likely formed opinions about. So, designing surveys and methods for gathering data on perception became increasingly a matter of streamlining and personalising as time went on. Our questions became leaner, more intuitive to answer, and more qualitative as time went on.

What we’ve learned is that the titles produced by UHI are what we call ‘complementary’. In the context of our evaluation, complementary is one of several different levels at which a new tool becomes a part of an established workflow and does or does not change that flow in the process. What these students were telling us is that the titles in question served best as references, truncating information found in more in-depth texts and class lessons, or combining information from multiple texts and class lessons, but not to a degree which might replace what came before it. This might also explain why the qualitative feedback that’s been recorded indicates that these titles are seen by students as “refresher” material, not only complimenting their other learning resources, but potentially useful beyond academia and well into their professional practice.

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