E-Textbooks: “An Interesting Ride”

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted at the EDUCAUSE annual meeting in October 2009 by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/er/eTextbooks>.

Gerry Bayne: One study I recently read suggests that a typical college student spends up to $1,000 annually on textbooks and that many students don't buy textbooks at all because they're too expensive. Could you talk about how your campuses are addressing this problem?

Robin Schulze: This is a continuing issue on the Penn State campus. I'd say the cost is well over $1,000 per year. Trying to figure out how to manage that cost is very difficult. I know that a lot of our students have taken things into their own hands, as students often do on campuses, and they have formed consortia in various classes. There will be, say, twenty kids who buy one textbook. They will then make copies and scans, and they will find whatever way they can to disseminate all the information in the textbook without buying more than one copy. But trying to figure out how we're going to manage this is difficult. I know that the rental of textbooks has been posed on the horizon as perhaps a solution. We do have electronic reserves, like everyone else. But there are copyright issues in terms of what we can use and how much we can use. What happens there?

Paul Musket: Until the students grasp the digital book idea, it's problematic. They generally come from K–12, where they don't have digital books, to this environment, where digital books appear to be a good deal. The problem is the idea that the price of digital books will be 50 percent of the new price. That's not holding. We're seeing anywhere from 35 to 42 percent off.

Schulze: We've had situations where the price is only 20 percent off. And at that point, there's not a whole lot of difference between getting the electronic book or going to the best discount house and getting the hardcover version.

Bayne: Do any of you have insights on the reasoning behind this pricing?

Musket: The need to recoup costs. Publishers want to sell new books every time. They're trying to figure out how they can get their R&D covered, their intellectual property costs covered, their royalties and fees covered. An e-model is good, but those costs are creeping up also. It's whatever the market will bear.

Schulze: When I think about the issues of R&D and book design and all these things, it's interesting to think of the textbook producer, in whatever form, as being essentially the delivery middleman. I think a lot of the publishers are getting a bit worried about this electronic universe, since university campuses have really great faculties. It's becoming more and more possible to think, “Oh gee, what would happen if Penn State decided it was going to produce its own books?”

Darla Runyon: Faculty have the content knowledge to develop e-textbooks. But most don't have the skills to develop the interactive pieces that teachers want to see in an electronic textbook. Publishers have those people on board and doing that now. The whole curriculum that you would need to develop would take quite a bit of development time.

Bayne: And more staff.

Schulze: And more staff. But I really think that the universities that pursue this aggressively are going to come out well in the end.

Musket: Do both of you have groups on campus—such as educational technology or instructional technology groups—that assist faculty in creating content?

Runyon: Yes.

Schulze: Yes.

Musket: If a department were to create educational materials for classes, there are people, time, and things to consider. For example, how will those people be compensated or, more so, how will the department be compensated for employing those people who create the content?

Bayne: In your experience with electronic textbooks, do you think they engage the student better than print textbooks?

Runyon: We started out with e-readers, and our students didn't like the e-reader at all. So we then focused on using the notebook computer, which everyone on campus has, and...
that seemed to go over a little bit better. This fall we have been using a delivery system that is standard. It does allow them to highlight and search and share notes and do those kinds of things. They may not have gotten more value out of the system, but we’re hoping that they did use those aspects.

Schulze: The human factor should not be undersold. If the faculty member is very, very interested in the electronic textbook and really makes an effort, that increases its value. But if the faculty member is already resistant to the process, there’s just no way you’re going to sell the idea, no matter what you do. It’s also interesting for me, as the head of the department of English, because when you’re talking about textbooks, you’re not talking about the same thing that we use for humanistic content in an English department. What worries me a lot about the electronic reader situation is the divergent desires involved. On the one hand, we want to create incredibly lush, rich, virtual environments in which students learn—environments that are all hyper-connected. But when students get so engaged in where they can go and what they can do and how many things they can do, the notion that they’re actually paying attention to anything that’s in the content-driven portion of the program is pretty much suspect. Will any of this allow for the deeply immersive humanistic reading that English professors like me really, really like?

Bayne: In other words, how do you get them to settle down and really read?

Schulze: Yes. I think it’s very important for academics all over the United States to start taking the hardware issues of reading and learning more seriously. We’re ceding a lot of important developments to people who are really entertainment engineers. And if we want students to learn and to think in the ways that we, as academics, want them to learn and to think, this is a hardware issue.

Runyon: Talking with a publisher recently, I was thinking to myself: “Wait a minute, you’re not looking at this from our side here. You need to hear what we have to say.” And they want to hear that. They want to try things. They want to do pilots and experiments to find out what is going to work.

Musket: It’s going to be an interesting ride.