

E-readers: devices for passionate leisure readers or an empowering scholarly resource?

Peter Lund¹, Katie Appleton², Bryan Dawson², Nick Loakes³, Ann O'Brien³

1. Learning Resources, University of Canterbury, formerly Loughborough University Library, UK.
2. Loughborough University Library, Loughborough, UK.
3. Department of Information Science, Loughborough University, UK.

Acknowledgements

Dr Gabriel Egan⁴ and Emma Clift⁴, Dave Clemens⁵, Deborah Fitchett⁵, Catherine Jane⁵,

4. Department of English and Drama, Loughborough University, UK.
5. Learning Resources, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Summary

E-books are increasingly common in academic libraries and e-book reading devices such as the Kindle and iPad are achieving huge sales for leisure readers. The authors undertook a small study at Loughborough University Library to explore areas in which a variety of e-book readers might be applied. Areas included: e-books on reading lists, PDFs of journal articles, inter-library loans supplied from the British Library and teaching support for Shakespeare studies. Whilst the e-readers did not offer sufficient advantages to merit integrating them into a service, the study proved useful in developing library expertise in the use of and support for e-readers.

Introduction

E-books are becoming more common in academic libraries for a number of reasons. They may be attractive to Library management since they can be acquired quickly, are easier to store and offer huge space saving advantages. There is the convenience of 24/7 access and if you happen to be a librarian in

earthquake-torn Christchurch, they may offer the only alternative to the paper versions stored in libraries suffering temporary closure.

But if both e-books and paper books are available, then what do readers think of e-books? Before discussing the study at Loughborough University it is worth examining some recent papers which sought to find out. (Alexander, 2011; Joint Information Systems Committee, 2009; University of California Libraries, 2011).

There are a variety of views. Some readers mentioned the searchability and convenience of e-books, others emphasised a need, in the scholarly environment, to annotate material and to use the physical book.

“I have worked with e-books (downloadable from the library and purchased from Kindle). Let me put this as plainly as possible: they are completely unsatisfactory to work with for those of us in the humanities.” (*Faculty, Arts & Humanities, University of California, 2011*).

“Prefer paper format, which allows me to write on the pages (only in my books, of course; not the library copies!) and use a highlighter pen to make notes, etc.” (*Graduate Student, Arts & Humanities, University of California, 2011*)

“E-books are a convenience to see if I need that book. Once I have figured out that I do indeed need the book, I either go purchase it or borrow it from the library.” (*Undergraduate, Life & Health Sciences, University of California, 2011*).

“[The ebook] is significantly more restrictive. It limits where and when I can work as PC access is required.” (*Student, JISC focus group, UK*)

But is PC access necessary? E-readers are becoming increasingly common – the e-ink used by devices such as the Kindle, Sony Touch and iRiver Story enable e-books to be read on these e-readers in broad daylight and without problems associated with screen glare. The ability to store large numbers of books and PDFs are other reasons that the Kindle and similar devices are developing quickly for personal use. During 2011 e-books outsold paperback and hardback sales at Amazon (Yarow, 2011). However the Digital Rights Management (DRM) on many e-books restricts lending and a mix of standards means content is limited to particular suppliers. For these reasons libraries will find lending devices difficult. Relying on users to supply their own devices seems a more likely way forward.

A Loughborough University Library survey of students (November 2010, unpublished) indicates that of 1107 respondents some 25% can already access e-books in some form from mobile device (54 had Kindles, 17 Sony readers, 48 iPads, 153 other - mainly iPod Touch and iPhone). It seems likely that the number of students and faculty with such mobile devices will grow. With this in mind, Loughborough University sought to discover how e-book devices could be used in the Library.

Literature review and other e-reader projects

There are a large number of news articles discussing e-readers. However most instructive discussions are those highlighting the potential use of e-readers in academic libraries. Two of these were recently provided by Dougherty (2010) and by Drinkwater (2010). Drinkwater in particular illustrates a number of weaknesses of e-readers:

1. Lack of academic content
2. Fiddly, fragile, needs charging
3. DRM (Digital Rights Management)
4. Environmental e.g. inability to replace a battery

Drinkwater concludes that *“it may be that the devices sit better as a very specialised consumer device than as part of a core library service”*.

Polanka (2011) editor of *No Shelf Required: e-books in libraries* neatly summarises the use of e-books in libraries and contains some case studies of the use of e-readers in US academic libraries.

A number of university libraries have undertaken initiatives involving e-readers. As part of this project the authors contacted those responsible for the following projects:

- North Carolina State University – week loan lending of Kindles for user selected leisure reading and a Kindle DX for newspapers on 4 hour loan. Sony Readers for classics. (NCSU, 2011; Pozo, 2011)
- University of Newcastle – lending Sony Readers for use with PDFs (2011)
- Loughborough College – lending iPads for searching key databases e.g. Mintel within the Library.

Rather than repeating similar trials the Loughborough University study sought to evaluate a range of e-readers (including: iPad, Kindle, iRiver Story and Sony Reader Touch edition).

E-reader devices trialled

An evaluation was made by Nick Loakes (Student Summer Intern, in the Department of Information Science) as to the ability of each reader to support a range of functions, these being:

- Tools for academic use – highlighting, notes, bookmarks
- Navigation – search features, page numbering system, jump to page
- Reading on the device – screen orientation, font sizes, zoom features, reading PDFs
- Downloading content – wifi, buying books, free content, PDFs, formats supported
- Battery life and charging

Using evaluation scores assigned by Nick, the Sony Reader Touch edition narrowly beat the Kindle into second place, the Sony Reader Touch Edition scoring highly in the Tools for academic use category. Full details are contained in a report available on the Loughborough University Library website. (Lund et al, 2011).

The study explored how these might be used in a number of areas including:

- e-books on reading lists
- PDFs
- Inter-Library loans
- Newspapers
- Teaching support

E-books on reading lists

Loughborough University Library has two preferred suppliers of e-books: DawsonERA and EBL. When canvassed at a major e-book conference (SLIC: Working in a digital age- the 10th anniversary e-books conference, October 2010) none of the major e-book suppliers seem to be developing any services to e-reader devices. DawsonERA do not allow e-books to be downloaded or

accessed from an e-reader device directly, though via the internet e-books from this supplier could be accessed on an iPad.

EBL **do** allow the downloading of their e-books onto such e-reader devices, such as the iRiver Story and Sony Reader which support the EPUB standard and have Adobe Digital Editions installed. A number of EBL e-books are available on reading lists. Using a script from the Library Systems team the project group were able to determine that a number of Geography and Politics modules contained multiple items available as e-books from EBL. However, determined users who follow the lengthy download instructions found that, due to the Digital Rights Management installed, their reward was the ability to read and annotate the book for **one day only** in the majority of cases. Most unsatisfactory! At Loughborough this has now been improved to seven days. Subsequent work at the University of Canterbury shows that EBL e-books can be easily downloaded to an iPad using a Bluefire app though again this is limited to 1-4 days.

PDFs

Font size of PDFs cannot be changed so some PDFs require the use of a zoom feature. This is particularly apparent when reading PDFs on the 6 inch screens of the iRiver Story, Sony Reader and the Kindle making this an imperfect reading experience.

Pre-existing PDFs tend to be more easily readable on a 9inch Kindle DX and on the iPad. The iPad also has the ability to display in colour.

Newspapers

Apps exist to enable newspapers such as *The Times* and *Sunday Times* by subscription to be read on the iPad. The *Independent* and a number of US newspapers are also freely available. The Kindle has subscriptions for *The Times*, *FT*, *Mail*, *Telegraph* and *Independent* available. Reading newspapers on larger format e-readers was found to be quite satisfactory for personal use. NCSU lend a Kindle DX loaded with newspapers for 4 hour loan, however whilst this could be a way of encouraging students to read newspapers it would appear to be an expensive way of lending them. If a critical mass of major newspapers become available in this medium it may be worth considering the

development of a service whereby readers can borrow e-readers to search and view newspapers.

Teaching support

At Loughborough University, Module EAB027 Shakespeare *Page to Stage* is one instance where the lecturer (Dr Gabriel Egan, Reader in Shakespeare Studies) has a need for students to consult specific editions of set texts in class. During Spring 2011 three students trialled the use of Kindles to see if this approach offered an alternative to paper-based plays.

Students discerned a number of advantages and disadvantages of using the Kindle. The word searchability of the Kindle allowed students to identify themes and repeated ideas. Using the cursor to find definitions of words also proved useful. Notetaking wasn't easy. One student summarised her use of the Kindle:

“I would recommend the Kindle for general reading as it is easier to hold and if you know what you are looking for then it is great. However, for studies and having to navigate through the books it is much more inconvenient and wastes a lot of time.”

Dr Gabriel Egan was asked to rate the success of the project (by email):

“Well, we found out that for some academic purposes the choice of editions of a literary text really is crucial, and that because Kindle doesn't have the very best editions the Kindle is no good for this kind of class. It may well be that other modules (mine and others') are less highly sensitive to choice of edition and hence that Kindles are suitable for those classes. I consider this a significant find that makes the project a success as an exploration of the issue”.

Conclusions

Digital Rights Management severely restricts the ability of academic libraries to lend e-readers with pre-installed content. Whilst some e-books *are* available on reading lists, only a few of these can be read on e-readers. Publishers and e-book suppliers currently seem reluctant to expand in this area. Provision of Inter-library loans to e-readers is possible but is too staff intensive and overly

complex to be a viable service. Kindles and other devices may have applications in some undergraduate classes but didn't work well with Shakespeare Studies.

However, the study helped develop library expertise in the use of and support for e-readers and further staff training was undertaken to advise students and staff seeking to use their e-readers in the Library.

Tablets like the iPad have more flexible uses e.g. for reading newspapers and PDFs. Other e-readers may yet overcome some of these barriers, for instance coloured e-Ink is becoming available (Taylor, 2011) to increase the flexibility of use of such e-readers. However at the moment they do not have widespread application in the scholarly environment.

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