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13:6. Online Coursepacks Through a Campus Bookstore: A Test Study

Editorial

It is common knowledge that students who study at a distance have unique support needs. Increasingly, however, the line between distance and resident students is blurring as more and more “resident” courses incorporate what were formally thought of as “distance” elements. At the same time, we are told that resident students will increasingly expect the convenience of online services even in the traditional environment.

This month’s issue of DEOSNEWS offers results of a test to measure the level of usage of online course packets offered in support of a blended course. Although the test course was not an online course, the lessons learned in this study are applicable to both online and blended programs and services, particularly as they relate to the need for “problem-free” technology that makes services transparent to students.

Melody Thompson
DEOSNEWS editor

Online Coursepacks Through a Campus Bookstore: A Test Study

James B. Tyler

During the academic year 2002-2003, the Associated Student Bookstore at California State University, Chico provided electronic coursepacks for several classes to test the potential of offering this service broadly to students. This paper reports the results of this experiment, discusses the subsequent decision to partner with XanEdu, a commercial coursepack provider, and offers recommendations for the use of online coursepacks.

Most faculty at CSU, Chico who want paper coursepacks of journal articles and book chapters for their courses contact the campus bookstore. The bookstore acquires copyright permissions for these materials through the Copyright Clearance Center. The requested number of copies of each packet are then printed by the campus print center and sold to students in the bookstore. This service frees instructors from the time

consuming tasks and the liabilities of acquiring copyright permissions, printing, and handling money for the packets.

This scenario is probably typical for most colleges and universities. Unfortunately for faculty who are teaching courses online and need digital coursepacks for their students, most will find that their bookstore doesn't yet offer a similar service for online coursepacks. According to Steve Dubey (2003), director of the campus bookstore at CSU, Chico, most of the other 22 campuses bookstores in the CSU system had not yet set up an online coursepack service. After contacting other bookstores in the CSU system in the spring semester of 2003, Mr. Dubey received responses from only two other bookstores that were offering electronic coursepacks. Both of these stores had partnered with XanEdu, a commercial provider. Bookstore managers have held off offering the service because of numerous concerns, e.g.,

- How can bookstores prevent students from sharing digital copies?
- Would the bookstore be exposed to any copyright liability?
- Who will scan and convert the materials to digital format?

Despite these concerns, during the academic year 2000-2003, Dubey and the other administrators of the bookstore were willing to run a test experiment on providing online coursepacks for students in two courses taught by Frank Armstrong, a faculty member in the department of Communication Design.

First Semester Trial

Twenty-eight students in two sections of Armstrong's introductory Typography course (CDES-133A) participated in the experiment during Fall 2002. This was a blended or hybrid, rather than a completely online, course, in which the instructor used the Web extensively to supplement the course. Each section of this class met twice weekly on campus in a Macintosh computer lab with high-speed access to the Internet and laser printers.

Prior to working with the bookstore in the test experiment, Armstrong had been contacted by companies specializing in e-coursepacks, but found that none offered material in the discipline that he needed. He was also aware that he could establish his own account with the Copyright Clearance Center to obtain permission for the required chapters and articles, but University policies prohibit the exchange of money between faculty and students. This led him to contact the author of this article, James Tyler, the Online Curriculum Support Librarian at CSU, Chico, who agreed to help him create an e-coursepack for his students. Tyler began by contacting eight book publishers or authors by email for Armstrong, and obtained permission from four of them for free use of the materials in his course. The one journal article Armstrong needed was available to students through the library from Ebsco Host's Academic Search Elite. (Academic Search Elite provides a feature that allows faculty to create persistent links to articles that can be used in online courses). [Note: Although the library had only one item for the online coursepack in this case, faculty still need to be reminded to first check with their library before requiring students to buy any online content. Some commercial providers

are marketing content to faculty and students that is already available to them for free from their library. If they have time, faculty can also contact copyright holders to seek permission to use their materials for free, to save their students even more money. For help see “How to Secure Permission to Use Copyrighted Works” at IUPUI’s Copyright Management Center website: <http://www.copyright.iupui.edu/permsec.htm#three>.]

Of the four remaining publishers who hadn’t granted copyright permission, two hadn’t responded at all, one was out of business, and the fourth asked for 15 cents/page per student enrolled in the course. Tyler and Armstrong next examined alternatives to purchasing permission through the Copyright Clearance Center, which would mean having to scan the content, post it online, and collect money. Armstrong had already considered using the materials under Fair Use, the TEACH Act or the Safe Harbor Guidelines, but they didn’t apply in this case. Another possible alternative was to post the material in electronic reserves at the library, but unfortunately this service was only in a test phase in their library and not yet available. Even if electronic reserves had been available, the CSU, Chico library would have fairly strict guidelines as to what could be placed in reserves, conforming to Fair Use. The electronic reserves service was not meant as a substitute for materials that normally would have been purchased by students in paper form. In the end, Armstrong and Tyler decided to contact the bookstore to determine if they would provide an e-coursepack for the course.

At an August, 2002 meeting with the campus bookstore administrators, the administrators agreed to offer an electronic coursepack to students in the Typography course as a test. The bookstore would first obtain copyright permissions directly from publishers. According to the textbook coordinator at the bookstore, working directly with publishers is easier than going through the Copyright Clearance Center, and publishers are increasingly offering this service themselves. Student employees of the bookstore would then scan the course materials, convert them to PDF files (Adobe’s Portable Document Format), and upload them onto the bookstore’s server. The bookstore’s server already has been configured to allow secure financial transactions, so students in the class would be able to purchase the packets with either their Wildcat (student-account) card or a personal credit card.

At the end of the fall 2002 semester, a meeting was held to discuss the outcome of that semester’s experiment. Of the 28 students in the class, bookstore records show 13 or 46% had purchased the online coursepack. For comparison, 20 students purchased each of the course’s two required textbooks. The director of the bookstore was pleased with these results. He noted that while the percentage of students who buy a course packet is in some cases higher, the result depends on whether or not the instructor “pushes” the packet. Armstrong reported that in this case he did encourage his students to read the material, reminding them that exam questions would be based on it. (It should also be noted that a paper version of the packet was not made available at the bookstore.) When asked about the percentage of students in a class who typically buy paper coursepacks, Dubey said that first year students usually will buy all textbooks and packets, whereas juniors and seniors do not purchase as many of their required textbooks. Due to textbook sharing, the bookstore sells fewer copies of a book the longer it is used on campus. In

response to a question about students sharing the packet in his class (since this was a major concern of the bookstore), Armstrong replied anecdotally that he didn't see anyone sharing or get the sense that the students were sharing the packet. Because of the uncertainty as to how the students were using the packet, Armstrong agreed to submit a questionnaire about such issues to his students at the final exam.

The bookstore was sufficiently pleased with the outcome of the experiment to continue offering the service next semester for Armstrong's courses and expanded the discussion to a Philosophy professor who was also interested in an online coursepack. The bookstore also considered the purchase of new software, Adobe Content Server, which provides more security for copyright protected materials. Students using this software must choose a single specific computer to view the hosted content, which helps prevent sharing of materials. Unfortunately, the software is expensive, approximately \$10,000 for a license. The bookstore was also concerned about who would scan and convert the materials. Most faculty want to do as little of this as possible, and the bookstore currently doesn't have scanners or the time to do it themselves.

Even facing such potentially high startup costs, the bookstore administrators continued to be interested in providing online coursepacks. They believe that this practice represents the direction that publishing is going in the future, with Dubey noting that "it probably will not pay on the front end, but will pay on the back end."

The cost to the students was two dollars for eight book chapters. Costs were kept low, with a 10% margin, since this was a test. The other five chapters and the journal article were free because a librarian had acquired permission for their free use from the publishers. Armstrong thought that the pricing was very reasonable for the packet that the bookstore provided, noting that if the packets are priced fairly, students will not bother going around the system to get it for free. Our findings seem to confirm this, as only one student out of 28 reported sharing the materials with a fellow student.

After the first semester of the test, Armstrong calculated that the average course grade for students who purchased an e-coursepack was 3.31(out of 4). The average course grade for students who did not purchase an e-coursepack was 2.65. An interesting question raised (but not answered) by these results, is "Were the higher achieving students more likely to purchase the packet or do coursepacks improve performance?" Of course other, untracked variables may have contributed to this result, but it may be worth pursuing in subsequent research with a larger number of students.

First Semester Survey Results

In conjunction with the final examination, Armstrong gave students an anonymous questionnaire about the online coursepack. Following are key results.

Students who purchased the packet

- Of the 13 students who said they purchased the online coursepack, all reported that they did not share their packets with anyone else.
- 31% said they were not satisfied, 31% somewhat satisfied, 23% satisfied, and 15% very satisfied.
- All four of the students who were “not satisfied” had technical problems and were unable to access the content at some point in the semester.
- Two of these students would choose an electronic packet over a paper packet, although one qualified this with, “If it worked.”
- Three suggested that we “make system stable,” “make it more reliable,” and “make it work!!”
- Three out of four who were “somewhat satisfied” had technical problems, and two said that they could not get access at times.
- Three out of four of the “somewhat satisfied” group also said they would choose a paper packet over electronic.
- Of the “satisfied” students, two out of three had no technical problems, yet two out of three said they’d choose paper over electronic.
- Of the two “very satisfied” students, one had no technical problems. The other had access problems and suggested that we make it accessible but not electronic.

In summary, for the students who purchased the packet, most of the dissatisfaction arose from access and technical problems. If given a choice, most (77%) would choose paper over electronic packets.

Students who did not purchase the packet

When asked “Do you normally buy coursepacks if they are in paper?” all 15 students in this group said yes. When asked why they didn’t purchase the e-coursepack, students replied with a variety of answers.

- One shared information with another student.
- One “did not usually have time to read them.”
- One didn’t like putting his/her credit card number on the Web.
- Another said a pre-printed packet could be studied anywhere without a computer, and that he/she would print it out anyway.
- Two noted “money issues.”
- Two didn’t like paying for information on the web since they are used to thinking of information from the Web as being free.
- Three said that they tried to purchase the packet, but that it didn’t work.
- Four thought it required too much effort.

Eight out of 15 (53%) who didn’t buy the packet said that they would choose paper over electronic. Two of the 15 (13%) were not sure and said they “do not know” or it “likely does not make a difference.” The remaining five (33%) would choose electronic over paper.

Students who preferred paper did so for a variety of reasons. Three preferred reading paper or liked it because they could study with it anywhere without a computer. One student said he/she would print it out on paper to read anyway. Two others said that they normally picked up the paper packets with their textbooks at the bookstore. Another said that it was better suited for his/her organizational system.

Students who indicated a preference for electronic over paper did not say why, except for one student who equated electronic with free. However, this same student reported that he/she didn't buy the packet because "most of all the info is on the web."

First Semester Conclusions

Stability, reliability and lack of user support were key problem issues for students who purchased or attempted to purchase the online course packet. Three students gave up after unsuccessful attempts to purchase the packet. Most students who bought the packet could not access the content more than once during the semester. Some could not access it at all. Several said that they asked for help, but that immediate help was unavailable. It is not known if some of the problems might have originated from the students' computers, browsers, or Internet connections, or if all of the problems were from the server side.

Based upon the first semester's experiment, it is clear that it is not enough to simply dump content for online coursepacks onto a bookstore's server and leave the students to their own devices. Bookstores must set up a support system that replies immediately to student questions, problems and requests. Instructors should also ask their students about any problems that they may be having and help resolve them.

To improve usability, stability and reliability, the bookstore should conduct user testing before the service is even offered. It is likely that purchasing software such as Adobe's Content Server, which is designed specifically for such a service, would improve the usability, stability and reliability. Such specialized content management software can also help protect sales and limit file sharing. In addition, if the packet fairly priced, the problem of students sharing content may not as serious as many feared.

Some other suggestions included making it easier for students to purchase the packets and providing other payment options for students who don't have a credit card, such as paying for it in the student union. For classes that meet on campus, paper packets should be provided as an alternative, or at least it should be easy for students to print copies.

Second Semester Trial

Unlike the first semester, students in the Spring 2003 course were given the choice between paper or electronic coursepacks. The change was made in response to the first semester's survey results that indicated that many students would prefer paper. The

experimenters also wanted to compare the reasons for students' preference for either paper or electronic versions.

Despite the higher costs of the paper packet, bookstore records show that 10 students out of 15, or 67%, in the spring course purchased the paper packet. Two out of 15, or 13%, bought the electronic packet. The cost of the paper packet was \$13.90 versus \$8.75 for the electronic packet.

Second Semester Survey Results

Students returned 15 surveys at the end of the semester. Eleven of the 15 students said they bought the paper packet and four said they bought the electronic. Why these figures differ from the bookstore's figures is unknown. Perhaps students borrowed copies, or perhaps they didn't want to admit they didn't read the materials, even though the survey form said it was anonymous and they were told not to sign their names.

Of the four students who said they bought the online coursepack, two were "somewhat satisfied," one was "satisfied" and the fourth "very satisfied." In contrast to the first semester, the complaints about technical problems were less heated and proportionately fewer in number. In response to the feedback from the first semester, the bookstore had worked to improve the interface and reliability of the electronic materials. A help button was added to the pages, for instance, and this appears to have worked.

The 11 students who said they bought the paper packet gave the following reasons for preferring paper: Two said it was easier to read; four said it was easier to study with or highlight; two liked paper's portability; and one said it was easier to buy than dealing with computers.

Overall Findings

Lack of Acceptance

The findings from the Chico Study, and the comments from other bookstore managers in the California State University system, indicate that currently students and faculty prefer paper over online coursepacks.

If we compare how students voted with their dollars, in the first semester, when the only choice was electronic, 46% of the students bought a coursepack. In the second semester, when the students had a choice of electronic or paper, 80% of the students bought a coursepack, and out of the total who bought a coursepack 10 out of 12, or 83%, chose the paper version.

In the first semester survey, out of 28 students 19 (68%) said they would choose paper over electronic, eight (29%) said they would choose electronic, and one (3%) was undecided. In the second semester survey, out of 15 students 12 (80%) said they would

choose paper, two (13%) said they would choose electronic, and one (7%) did not give a clear answer.

Three of the CSU bookstore managers from other campuses who replied to the Chico bookstore manager's questions about electronic coursepacks wrote comments about coursepack preferences. The first manager reported that, based on a survey, students preferred hard copy. The second manager said, "It appears students and faculty are not racing to have all their information in electronic format and still like a book or packet to hold on to." The third manager said, "We have done a couple of pilot projects where we offered the content electronically and the overwhelming response was that these students wanted the hard copy."

Technology Challenges

This study and other publications indicate that it is very important that students have the option to print online materials, especially for those delivered in PDF files (Portable Document Format). One of the main reasons why the print option is important is the poor resolution of computer monitors. As Joseph Sinclair (1998) writes in *Typography on the Web*, "Computer monitors offer low resolution barely adequate for prolonged reading." Most printers today print text at least at 600 dpi (dots per inch) resolution. This is the equivalent of 600 x 600, or 360,000 dots in one square inch. In contrast, monitors range from 72dpi to 116 dpi (Sinclair, 1998). This difference is probably a major factor in why most users prefer to read print. For online content delivered in PDF files, the importance of the print option jumps even higher as research indicates users dislike reading PDF files online. [For a list of usability problems and feedback from users who dislike PDFs see Jacob Nielsen's article, "PDF: Unfit for human consumption," in *Alertbox*. (Nielsen, 2000).]

According to a XanEdu Coursepack Sales Specialist, XanEdu has found that many faculty members prefer that their students get online access to coursepacks *and* have a printed packet mailed to them. Many students have technical problems such as slow computers and plug-in issues that cause online access problems. As a result, when students also get print copies the instructor knows they will all "be on the same page" during class. (Lewis, 2004)

Partnering with a Commercial Provider

As a result of the two-semester experiment, the CSU, Chico bookstore decided to partner with XanEdu, a commercial coursepack provider, and to no longer deliver coursepacks from the bookstore's server. The bookstore administration gave four main reasons why they decided to form this partnership:

- (1) The bookstore administration said that there would be no way to service distance learning faculty or students who were using WebCT from the bookstore server.
- (2) Staffing/personnel issues arose because there is no career management and information science (MIS) staff person in the bookstore. Traditionally the textbook

manager handles course packs in the bookstore, but Chico's textbook manager didn't have the time or technical background to operate the server and handle the other duties involved with hosting coursepacks, such as scanning and converting materials to digital format. At Chico, the bookstore hired an MIS student to handle these duties. Unfortunately, as the end of the coursepack experiment came to a close, the student hired for this role graduated.

- (3) The bookstore didn't have the necessary scanners.
- (4) No other bookstores in the CSU system were hosting the coursepack service alone. The three campuses who offered online coursepacks were using Xanedu.com, and they reported good results with XanEdu's service.

But Why a Partnership?

Why should faculty even bother with the bookstore and not deal directly with the commercial providers for online coursepack materials? There are several good reasons. Students typically can use their financial aid money to purchase course materials through their campus bookstore. Faculty can order and students can get their paper and electronic course materials in one place. Although commercial coursepack providers have recognized and responded to this trend, they haven't been able to meet all of these needs. Finally, one coursepack company probably will not be able to provide access to all the sources available to a bookstore, since bookstores are neutral providers and publishers are very competitive. For example, the XanEdu representative said that one major publisher refuses permission to XanEdu because it offers a competing coursepack service (Lewis, 2004).

The Future

Since most students and faculty members seem to prefer printed materials, a logical question to ask is, "Why even bother with online coursepacks?" We offer several reasons.

- (1) For distance education students who live beyond easy driving distance of their bookstores, the ease of online access, and the savings in postage are clear.
- (2) Although student preference for paper coursepacks may continue into the near future, the skyrocketing costs of print journals and textbooks probably will force all faculty, and not just distance educators, to consider alternatives such as the online coursepacks. Just as journal publishers have already accepted the digital transformation of their products, market forces and technology will probably push textbook publishers to resell components of their textbooks in digital formats like online coursepacks. Publishers one day probably will allow faculty not only to purchase sections of text for their online courses, but also illustrations, charts, and other textbook components. [For an interesting article that discusses the unbundling of textbooks, see the July, 2003 issue of Syllabus magazine, "Is the Academy Ready for Learning Objects?"]
- (3) The growth of online courses and supplemental use of the Web for face-to-face courses should push this trend along. Student acceptance and expectation of online

materials should also increase. A study conducted by Outsell, a research company that analyzes trends in the information content industry, shows that students and faculty turn to online library materials before printed ones (Carlson, 2002). For further verification, ask a librarian at your campus whether students prefer online or printed resources when searching for materials for their courses.

Conclusions

In the future, as both blended and distance learning opportunities expand, online coursepacks will increasingly be a service available to faculty and students from their institutions' bookstores, in partnership with commercial providers or from unaffiliated commercial providers. For distance students, those living far from their campus bookstore, or those with schedules that make trips to campus difficult, online coursepacks offer features worth their consideration. They provide convenience and savings from not having to drive to campus or pay the added costs of mailing.

It should be recognized that while online coursepacks are underutilized at present, this service will become more necessary in the future. As usage increases, faculty are encouraged to check with their library before requiring the purchase of any of the commercial coursepack materials since libraries are providing access to more and more journals online, and publishers who supply libraries are also improving their linking technologies (Langston, 2004). Faculty who are willing to put in the extra effort of first checking their library's collections and other sources of materials free for students and then offering them online can save their students money in a time when the cost of higher education is rising at alarming rates.

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