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Teaching Matters: Is There a Text in This Class? E-readers, E-books, and Information Literacy

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IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS?

E-readers, e-books, and information literacy

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This column focuses on the conceptual and practical aspects of teaching information literacy. Column co-editors Patrick Ragains and Janelle Zauha write about trends and issues that have come to our attention, but also solicit contributions to this space. Readers with ideas for Teaching Matters may contact Patrick Ragains at ragains@unr.edu, or the editors of Communications in Information Literacy at editors@comminfolit.org.

Several decades ago when literary critic Stanley Fish famously asked, “Is there a text in this class?” in his book of the same title, his theoretical question referenced a much different understanding of “a text” than we experience today in an academic classroom. Fish’s 1980 query highlighted the difficulty of arriving at an agreed upon textual meaning among a diverse community of readers who were focused on a printed book. Today his question reads much more literally than theoretically. Now we might well ask whether there actually is one physical, uniform, official text in a class given that the print text has mutated and migrated into so many new forms and formats, each with potential to impact the reader’s understanding and construction of meaning.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES
WITH E-BOOKS IN THE
ACADEMIC LIBRARY
COLLECTION IS AN IMPORTANT
FOUNDATION FOR THE
INSTRUCTION LIBRARIAN.

The class engaged with a text today is likely to experience a somewhat chaotic display of student-selected formats or containers for it, ranging from various print editions to online versions including pdf, epub, proprietary e-reader format, audio, hypertext, and others. Furthermore, students are likely to be reading the text using a wide range of technology platforms, including laptop computers, smart phones, e-reader devices, tablets, mp3 players, and old-fashioned paper. The text itself, the conveyor of meaning for the interpretive community of the classroom, may be as varied in content as it is in container and platform, depending on when it was first published, how many editions have been issued, the copyright status of these editions, whether they have been digitized, and their availability in various formats and price ranges.

What does this proliferation of formats, technologies, and texts have to do with librarians and information literacy? Should it matter to us? At first glance, this variety of delivery systems and formats might seem simply a delightfully democratic development. With the current crescendo in popularity of electronic reading devices and electronic books, students in literature, history, cultural studies, and other heavily text-based disciplines now have many more options for accessing and reading assigned texts than ever before. In practice, however, the sudden popularity and spread of these reading options has left many parties in the university behind, including some of those currently using the technology but with an imperfect understanding of its capabilities or its drawbacks. Several problems result, highlighting the need for instruction from informed, experienced librarians.

First, the diversity of texts and technologies now flowing into the average classroom made possible in part by these new devices makes the group study of a specific text considerably more difficult than it was in the 1980s. For those fields such as literature, history, cultural studies, and other humanities disciplines in which close reading of texts is foundational, the authority and integrity of the text certainly matters. Some texts available at no cost on the Web are simply wrong: For example, the public domain versions of Emily Dickinson’s poetry are marked by the removal of dashes and other “corrections” made to her work in its first publication, which was subsequently replaced by

editions that restored the poet's original syntax. These more authentic editions are still under copyright and are not available for free download. As it turns out, the student who studies the freely accessible Dickinson is not actually reading Dickinson and may not be aware of it. This definitely poses an information literacy issue that any librarian will recognize.

In addition, students' unfamiliarity with the technicalities of using e-reading devices combined with their sometimes clumsy design can often impede class discussion. The fundamental principles of close reading (Culler, 2010), which include techniques such as marking and annotating portions of texts in order to easily return to them during class discussion, are still not easy to execute on most e-readers. Students have difficulty bookmarking, highlighting, and note-taking on them; and if they are not experts at using the devices, they cannot quickly locate passages to illustrate meaning (Behler & Lush, 2011; Gielen, 2011). This means they have difficulty entering into the rapid flow of argument and discussion that characterizes the humanities classroom. The absence of page numbers in some devices compounds the problem of being lost in a sea of electronic text. While the American College of Research Libraries' (ACRL's) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education distinguish between information literacy and information technology skills, they recognize that "[i]ncreasingly, information technology skills are interwoven with, and support, information literacy" (ACRL, 2000). Just as we understand the connection between the principles of knowledge management and instruction in the use of bibliographic citation software, so must we acknowledge the fundamental connection between texts and these new technologies and the challenges they pose to information literacy.

Another problem that arises with the use of these devices is one of access to academic texts. While high profile e-reading devices such as Nook, Kindle, and iPad open a world of electronic texts to students in a convenient, portable format that is often inexpensive, these devices can't easily be used to read books or articles from the academic library collection because of digital rights management (DRM) issues and the incompatibility of formats such as pdf with most e-readers. Thus a connection between the library and the student e-reader is broken and needs to be mended through instruction and outreach, as well as by collection improvements and perhaps collaboration with a local, public library. Understanding the issues with e-books in the academic library collection generally is an important foundation for the instruction librarian. Hodges, Preston, and Hamilton (2010) provide an overview of e-book challenges and developments that will help make e-reader compatibility problems clearer for the librarian as she seeks to bridge the library's collection and the needs of e-readers.

Other classroom issues evolve out of the great variety of popular reading devices, which share some common features and functions but vary widely in technical detail. Methods for downloading books, turning pages, and otherwise navigating, bookmarking, highlighting, and note taking are just some of the features that differ markedly between devices. Instructors and fellow students can't possibly be versed in how all these devices work, so immediate assistance for the puzzled student in the classroom isn't likely. Instructors who are utterly unfamiliar with such devices may find it stressful to have to cope with them in their classes, especially if they observe students foundering in discussion because of their inability to navigate the text. While

some instructors may want to take a hard line regarding use of these devices, others will welcome advice and assistance from their liaison librarian to increase their knowledge and comfort with e-readers.

Do all these issues make e-readers a poor choice for students? Should the academic library steer clear of e-readers and leave the training, collection, and access issues to the local public library? Certainly not. Even if we wanted to advise against the use of e-readers on campus, we would be shouting into the wind. As costs for devices go down, as their ease of use increases, and as the availability and interchangeability of electronic texts increase, we will see more of these in the classroom and the library, as well as more acceptance of e-textbooks in general because students' use and understanding of technology is constantly increasing (Weisberg, 2011).

E-readers hold many attractions for students and faculty (including librarians): They are perceived as green, easier to carry than loads of print books, and they play well with other mobile devices to which many of us, especially students, have already become deeply attached. A recent development that will only add to their popularity is Amazon's decision to let public libraries circulate Kindle books to their patrons (Carmody, 2011). Added to this is the movement toward more epub formatting that facilitates importing and reading non-device-specific texts such as pdf files on e-readers and tablets, thus further opening up the world of free texts on the web to the users of any device. This development should also help make more academic e-books and journals compatible with e-readers.

Despite their issues, what the popularity of e-readers does mean is that the academic

library, particularly the reference and instruction librarian, cannot afford to be ignorant of how and why they are used on campus. The instruction librarian must be aware of how (or whether) e-readers are being incorporated into classes by instructors or students in her subject liaison areas, including how they impact classroom uses of texts and any problems they present. She must identify opportunities for the library to assist with their use. Therefore, the librarian needs to be able to use e-readers herself. It is one thing to teach students and faculty how to access e-books in the collection and read them on a standard computer screen. It's quite another to understand, promote, and teach the variety of reading device options jockeying for top market position around the world, *and* to understand the electronic text formats available for various devices. A basic list of e-reader competencies or goals for the instruction librarian might include:

- Understand textual issues posed by e-texts—including editions, accuracy, and copyright.
- Know the basic capabilities and limitations of the most popular devices and the differences between them.
- Locate sources for compatible texts, including the academic library collection, the local public library, commercial sources, and free Web repositories.
- Know how students in liaison departments use e-books and e-readers in the classroom and the issues pertinent in their fields.
- Identify what is happening with e-textbooks and e-readers broadly on campus, including any pilot projects in classes that are using electronic textbooks and how students are accessing them.

The following are some helpful links to e-reader information on the Web to help the librarian feel more confident that she is up to date on developments and access options for e-readers and compatible texts:

- News about e-reading developments: see Internet Public Library's (IPL) "eReader Resources" <http://www.ipl.org/div/ereader/>
- Clearinghouse for free books and price comparisons on the web: see Ink Mesh <http://inkmesh.com/>
- Reviews of e-reading devices: see "CNET Reviews" <http://reviews.cnet.com/ebook-readers/>
- Comparisons of reading devices: see "Ebook Reader Comparison Chart" <http://www.wireless-reading-device.net/ebook-reader-comparison-chart>

The academic library as a whole must decide what steps it will take to enable its librarians to teach to the issues of e-readers and how it will programmatically help students and faculty achieve technological fluency and information literacy in this area. What steps should the academic library take regarding e-readers? Some starting points may include:

- Purchase and experiment with devices as the budget allows in order familiarize librarians and other staff with the most popular devices
- Provide training for librarians and staff. Public libraries are miles ahead on this, so consulting their tips on the Web and in the literature will help determine the content of this training. A recent blog posting from the Twinsburg

Public Library in Ohio is a good starting point (Weaver, 2011).

- Explore practices and pilot projects reported in the library literature to gather ideas for local application. For example, Tees (2010) provides best practice pointers and an overview of e-readers in academic libraries.
- Consider implementing a limited lending program to introduce devices to faculty and students across campus.
- Reach out to faculty who may be seeing these devices in classrooms where close reading of specific editions may be disrupted by their use.
- Teach their use and issues to faculty, students, and staff in open workshops.
- Collaborate with local public libraries to promote collection strengths and fill gaps in the area of e-reader texts.

There is no doubt that the e-book options available now for hand-held e-readers are more likely to suit the reading needs and habits of diverse learners and situations. From the academic librarian's point of view, the several decades we've spent acquiring and marketing e-books now seems to be paying off, if only our primarily pdf-based e-books could be easily re-formatted quickly for use on the new hand-held devices! The tyranny of the back-lit computer screen has been broken by electronic ink on the Kindle and the Nook; the clumsiness of the personal computer, even in laptop form, has been conquered by the development of elegant touch-tablet readers such as the iPad. Even the most ubiquitous mobile device, the smart phone, can be used to read books. Now we need to understand what information literacy in e-reading devices

looks like in our students, staff, and faculty and decide how we will incorporate it into our instruction programs.

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