

Beginning Ebooks: Vose Seminary's Experience So Far

by Nathan Hobby

In this paper, I offer a practical account of how Vose Seminary Library has started out in ebooks. It is intentionally aimed at smaller libraries who either have not yet started ebooks, or are in the early stages. It is the story of offering ebooks in a library with few staff, little money, little expertise in the area, and little time. This makes it relevant, I am sure, to many ANZTLA libraries.

Our college has a full-time enrolment of about 90. We are part of the Australian College of Theology, and most of our students are studying for their degrees. We also have a good number of vocational students studying for Certificate IV or diplomas. We have 41,000 print books and a staff of 1.8 full time equivalent. When I started at Vose in 2008, ebooks seemed a long way over the horizon for us; we were still trying to get our catalogue online. The turning point was in 2010 when I first started using ebooks myself as a student at the University of Western Australia. These ebooks were provided by EBL, and I was impressed by the range and the ease of using them. I could see the potential benefits to students, and I decided it was time to make a start in ebooks.

EBL has a global presence and was recently acquired by Proquest, but it actually started in Perth. At the time, we investigated the alternatives and EBL seemed the best option for us. Three years later, the field has already changed, and I will talk briefly at the end about our current stage of signing up to a second provider.

Purchased Ebooks

One of the choices to make in EBL is whether to purchase ebooks or to offer short-term loans. We began with the simpler option of purchasing ebooks, and began building up a collection in much the same way as one would with print books. Our purchasing rate has slowed down due to our switch to short-term loans, but as of July 2013 we have 650 owned ebooks.



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EBL has a one-time platform fee, which can be paid upfront or incrementally. The incremental option is 10 percent extra on the purchase of each ebook. There is also a minimum spend per year of \$3000 or else a \$750 fee applies. In 2011, EBL were offering a consortium deal on this for ANZTLA libraries, which meant the minimum spend did not apply, but I assume this has now expired.

The cost of ebooks with most vendors seems to be set by the publishers, and is typically the full retail price of the print book. Of course, with the discounts on books libraries receive, the full retail price is more than we’re used to paying.

In using a model of purchased ebooks only, libraries have to spend a lot of money to start to build a collection which will actually have any impact, and come onto students’ radars. An obvious strategy is to start with high-demand titles for units which are running in the immediate future. The difficulty is that a lot of titles libraries will want will not be available.

One of the attractions of EBL is its lending model. The standard model is called ‘non-linear’ and it usually allows a total of 325 days of loans annually per purchased book. This means that ten users could be simultaneously accessing it, and even if they have all downloaded it for 7 days, the usage total is only 70 days out of the allowed 325 days. We are yet to use up the annual allowance on any of our ebooks.

The User-Experience

Users can discover our ebooks in two ways – through the library catalogue or through the ebook portal directly.

The catalogue records provided free by EBL do not meet normal cataloguing standards. However, they do have summaries and contents. These are both truncated to ensure the file size is not too big.

We had spent a lot of time improving our subject authorities and were unhappy about the non-standard subject headings pouring in from the EBL records. To counteract this, we began to mask subject fields on the imported records, meaning the subject fields were not imported. Otherwise, we have decided not to be too worried about the substandard catalogue records. We enhance and correct the titles we own, and don’t worry about the non-owned titles.

We have created limiters on our catalogue so users can restrict their search to ebooks. Once the user finds a book they want to read, they can click on the URL and they’re taken to an EBL login screen. We also provide a link straight to the EBL portal so that users can start there if they prefer.

Users can read ebooks in two ways – reading online or downloading. Reading online means the ebook is read within the browser. Typically, pages can be slow to load if a user is trying to scan through the book. Users reading online can print or copy text, and the allowance for both is more generous than copyright allowances. It is possible to search the full text of the ebooks, and to add notes.



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Demand Driven Acquisition and Short Term Loans

In late 2011, we decided to move to a dual model, offering demand-driven acquisition (DDA) in addition to our purchased ebooks. I should note firstly that DDA or PDA (patron-driven acquisition) is a misnomer in the case of EBL, as a library need not acquire anything. Short-term loans mean libraries can offer access to ebooks they don’t own without purchasing them even if users do access them. Short-term loans are offered at different prices for 1 day, 7 days, 14 days, 28 days. One day loans are typically 10% of the list price of the ebook and 28 day loans are typically 25%.


The first step in moving to DDA was to create a profile. We gave EBL the limits we wanted to set, and they sent us records matching these. Initially, we simply set the limits by subject area and price. The subjects we specified were religion, social sciences, business, history and education. We included business and education because our college had just announced the plan to offer courses in these disciplines and it was the only way to create an instant collection in these disciplines.

We set the price limit at US\$10 per loan. This means that any titles with a short-term loan cost higher than this were not accessible by our users. If the Australian dollar keeps heading lower, we may set the amount lower. We also set a cap of the total amount of monthly short-term-loans; however, so far our greatest expenditure has only been about \$150 for a month.

These parameters initially gave us 62,000 ebooks to offer. The main problem with this list was quality, with a portion of the titles of dubious quality. The original profile contained titles like *Aliens in America: A UFO Hunter’s Guide to Extraterrestrial Hotspots Across the U.S.* We initially addressed this by identifying publishers we wanted to exclude from the profile, but we could never get them all.

Eventually, we decided to reverse the selection criteria, and identify the publishers we positively wanted on our list. It was the right decision, despite taking some time. It only reduced our ebook list by 12,000 titles to 50,000, and we eliminated most of the dubious ones. The only problem was that certain publishers have a very mixed list – perhaps with several very different imprints. Baker was the classic example, with serious imprints like Baker Academic mixed with their Amish fiction books under their Bethany House imprint, and all coming under *Baker* in EBL’s records.

Each month, EBL sends us two automatically generated files of MARC records – one for new titles which match our profile and one of titles to delete, usually because their price has risen. Initially, the technical side of the deletions was a problem, but we worked out a way to do it. Our library management system, Liberty, can tag imported records. We import the records for the titles to be deleted and tag these records as *To Be Deleted*. We then select all titles with this tag and delete all.



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The philosophy of DDA is obviously a matter for debate. I think that used properly and in conjunction with conventional collection development, its benefits far outweigh its drawbacks. DDA has made it possible for even small libraries to offer a wider range of books than they could ever dream of doing. It means that our students researching niche assignments find material which we would not have purchased. As an example, in a missions unit, students are asked to research a people-group of their choice. It would be out of the question for us to try to build up print holdings on all the people-groups students might choose. Yet our non-owned ebooks met some of the students' information needs at a low cost to us, with students accessing ebooks on Myanmar, Indonesia and other countries. DDA recognises that although users need guidance and direction in selecting books, sometimes they really do know best what they need. In looking over the titles users have borrowed on short-term loan, I am impressed. They relate closely to assignment topics set, they are generally scholarly titles, and they generally reflect gaps in our print holdings.

Authentication

Authentication is often an issue with electronic resources. I had hoped that we would be able to authenticate through Liberty but this didn't meet EBL's requirements. Similarly, our authentication with EBSCO wasn't going to work; this is a referring URL system through our website's content management system. This meant we had to create accounts for users directly with EBL.

Our first decision was to take the easiest approach and have users create their own account. The first time they attempt to access an ebook, an option would appear to *Create New Account* and they are then guided through the process of doing this. We had it set to automatically approve for requests from within the library's IP range, and to await approval for other requests.

Approaching authentication this way removed the workload of setting up accounts. However, there were three drawbacks. Firstly, it meant users created non-standard usernames which made the user list more difficult to manage. Secondly, I suspect it put off some users who were not confident or competent enough. Thirdly, it led to a lot of username and password confusion, as users would create their own username and password, and then forget it or confuse it with the usernames and passwords we had established for Liberty and EBSCO accounts.

We changed our process at the beginning of this year so that we now create accounts for each of our students. EBL requires a five character password, and so we switched our passwords for Liberty and EBSCO to five characters, and now have a degree of standardisation we have not had before. Our library assistant does need to create three different accounts for each user, which makes it labour intensive. However, it is still a more attractive option, given our budget, than the cost of a Single Sign On product.



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Usage by Students

The take-up of ebooks has not been as great as I imagined. For the last four semesters, it has stayed between 400 and 480 loans per semester. By comparison, we loan about 4000 print books per semester, so the usage is at 10-12 percent of conventional books.

We promoted ebooks heavily early on when we only had 100 titles. This may have been a mistake, as some students tried ebooks only to be disappointed by the range of titles and perhaps decide not to try again.

When we added DDA, we were concerned that students would create too many short-term loans and end up blowing our budget. While I have heard of universities having this problem, the opposite has been the case. Anecdotally, several students have expressed reluctance to access the non-owned ebooks as they don't want to cost the library money, not realising that short-term loans have actually saved us a considerable amount of money.

We have had 232 short-term loans in 20 months, meaning an average of 12 loans per month. The average cost of the short-term loans has been \$50 per month, which is \$4.12 per loan.

We would like to see greater take-up of the short-term loans, and so we have just changed our settings so that the cost is invisible to students. It's too early to tell whether this will help.

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Alternative Providers

Our original hope was that most of the ebooks we wanted would become available through EBL, and we would be able to stick to just one provider. However, it's increasingly clear that this is not going to be the case – there are a number of publishers who do not want to use EBL's model.

The tipping point when we realised we would need to look at a second provider was the withdrawal of the significant theological publisher, Baker, from EBL. Its ebooks were the most popular of our EBL titles. Earlier in 2013, they pulled their titles from EBL, as they did not want to offer the non-linear mode of access. Titles already purchased could continue to be accessed through EBL, but otherwise there is no more access to their titles. We were largely relying on short-term loan access to their ebooks, so this affected us a lot.

The ebook providers Overdrive and EBSCO both offer a number of publishers to which we would like to get access. After investigating the models, EBSCO was a much better fit for us, having a greater number of the publishers we wanted, a more flexible borrowing model, and no minimum spend.



“To sum up my advice for libraries beginning ebooks, I would say it is not as difficult nor as expensive as you might fear. It’s possible to start out with low risk and a small outlay. If your experience resembles ours, ebooks will enhance your library, but in a gradual way and not with a stampede away from print books.”

EBSCO Ebooks are accessed through EBSCOHost, meaning that it will fit within our existing electronic resources. They offer a wide range of access models, including subscriptions, but we are implementing a mixed model similar to what we are doing with EBL, with some titles purchased and many available on short-term loans.

We are setting up a PDA-list based mainly on publishers not available through EBL. Setting it up is quite different to EBL – it is not a profile against which matching titles are found. Instead, the selector adds individual titles to their PDA list. It does offer more control over what is available. Libraries using PDA, can either be invoiced weekly, or start with a minimum US\$1000 from which purchases are deducted. We have only implemented it this month, so I cannot report on it, only to say we are excited at broadening our ebook offerings immensely.

The Future

I predict that adding the titles from EBSCO will create an increase in ebook usage. I can foresee ebook loans being 20 percent of print book loans in a year’s time. The addition of these extra publishers from EBSCO may be the tipping point which convinces many of the reluctant staff and students to add ebook usage to their mix of resource usage. But even with an increase in usage, I believe that for the next five to ten years, ebooks will remain a supplement to print books for us at Vose.

To sum up my advice for libraries beginning ebooks, I would say it is not as difficult nor as expensive as you might fear. It’s possible to start out with low risk and a small outlay. If your experience resembles ours, ebooks will enhance your library, but in a gradual way and not with a stampede away from print books.