
Mama Don't Take My Codex/Tome Away¹

Strategies/Best Practices for Partnering New/Reluctant Users with Academic eBooks

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ABSTRACT Many readers of academic books prefer reading on paper. In many of our contexts, however, avoiding academic eBooks is becoming less and less of an option as students (as well as other users) have few viable opportunities for accessing print-on-paper information if that content is already available to them in electronic form. This session primarily considered ways in which librarians and information professionals can demystify and make useful the academic eBook for the (disinclined) user.

Currently, we have a mixed bag of experiences regarding how the academic eBooks in our collections operate and we don't yet know what the academic eBook of the future will look like or be able to offer to our readers. This session explored some options for both preparing the uninitiated for the variety of eBooks they will encounter, as well as consider some point-of-service strategies that may prevent a research conversation from ending abruptly when paper resources on a topic are scarce. How can we best help the resources that we have access to currently be more informative for our readers?

MISMATCH

"It is no wonder that, when the library has been extending its scope, changing its outlook and altering its very character and functions, there should not be adequate understanding among the public as to what has been going on."² Academic eBooks can present particular challenges; without a plan for productively connecting them

with readers, libraries might want to consider for whom they are acquiring (and paying for) them. David W. Lewis concludes his book *Reimagining the Academic Library* with ten concrete steps to prepare academic libraries for the future. The first among them is to “retire the print collection now” with the implication seeming to be that the past is analog/print and the present/future is digital.³ It is beyond the scope of this presentation to consider the larger argument that Lewis is making, but on this particular point there is a sense that academic libraries are being advised to switch from a horse to a bicycle midstream. Before switching, libraries need to train and equip staff and readers.

For present users of academic libraries, questions of preference are important but questions of usability are paramount: if a theological library were able to complete the Herculean task of retiring the print collection efficiently and effectively, how would users make the transition to digital reading? Richard M. Adams asserts that, despite the proliferation of digital containers for what we still refer to as books, “the reading habits of our patrons remain the same.”⁴ Adams argues that we are in a sort of “incunabula period” somewhat like the time following the invention of the printing press when printed books closely followed the forms and styles of their manuscript counterparts. It may be true that the eBook will eventually become significantly different than digitized versions of the printed page, but we need to pair the eBooks that we have now with the readers that we have now.

The items that we call eBooks which we have now vary in quality and accessibility along several axes. Discoverability can be a problem, even in libraries employing federated search tools. Points of potential failure with regard to both the accessibility and usability of library eBooks are multiple and (somewhat) notorious.⁵ Loan periods can vary by platform and bear little resemblance to those of a library’s print collection. Some items considered academic eBooks work fairly smoothly for users with little more than a modicum of digital literacy, while others require users to have both tenacity and diligence, sometimes even with direct library staff intervention. There is a near imperative for library staff to know their eBook collections in facets beyond the ways they know their physical collections, because of the numerous variables with regard to discoverability, accessibility, and

usability with titles grouped under this heading “academic eBooks.” There is a parallel need for library staff to be able to quickly gauge both a reader’s degree of digital literacy and tolerance for deviation from the expectation that eBooks will be like print books. At some point a mismatch between the knowledge and effort required for using a particular resource and the patience a user brings to the encounter creates a situation which renders a title all but unusable (or worse). Readers are interested in reading: having access to the material relevant to their interest. Few relish having to learn the intricacies of making resources usable.⁶

There is a mismatch between the assumption/presumption of an all-digital future and the experience of both the existing eBooks and existing reader pools that most theological libraries experience. Leaving aside the eternal promise that “the technology is just not quite there yet,” with its wonderful and shiny and (supposedly) intuitive eBooks,⁷ how can we best match libraries’ current readers with the resources that they are provided today? Simply because a library has paid for access to a resource, does not mean that the readers using the library are able to actually access to it. This is a crucial distinction in whatever future there is for libraries and academic eBooks.

LEARNING GAPS

The sources of this mismatch on the readers’ side are at least three and likely include a fourth factor. If a user is unable to find or use (or unwilling to consider using) an eBook, it is probable that there is some form of learning gap between the user’s current knowledge and the knowledge that might make the resource useful for them. It is helpful to categorize these gaps into different dimensions of learning: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. A learning gap in the affective dimension may well be motivational (not wanting to put in the time to learn to use eBooks or to engage a particular interface) or it might be attitudinal (not liking eBooks as a concept, regardless of execution). If the suspected learning gap is in the affective dimension, its severity and source might be helpful information for the library staff to (gently) probe. Knowing the intended use for the resource (checking a reference vs. consulting a chapter vs. reading the entire book) may prove useful here, as well as knowing what the

particular format of the work allows and what it makes difficult.⁸ For some uses, eBooks can bring distinct advantages that readers may not have yet considered.

Anecdotally, a lot of information literacy education around eBooks (and other topics) seems to assume that the primary learning gap users have is behavioral: readers have not yet acquired the skills necessary to effectively use eBooks.⁹ Many library staff are well versed in teaching and demonstrating the processes necessary to use academic eBooks from their respective collections. A behavioral learning gap may be relatively easy to diagnose: a reader knows about and wants to access a resource, but cannot complete the process. This learning gap can also be the simplest to recognize when it has been overcome: the reader uses eBooks effectively. It should be noted that an apparent deficit in behavioral learning may actually reflect a gap in either affective or cognitive learning. If the reader is not motivated (affective learning gap) to use eBooks or if the user is not familiar with steps of using these resources (cognitive learning gap), he or she will not be able to demonstrate the skill. The source of the deficit cannot merely be assumed to be behavioral.

A cognitive learning gap may take a couple of forms. Most obviously, readers may not know what an eBook is or, more likely, may not be fully aware of the eBooks available at their library or the steps necessary to use them. One-click downloads may be an expected feature of (some) retail eBook vendors, but the process of accessing academic eBooks through a library is most likely a multistep process which can be quite opaque to many, if not most, readers. Not knowing the steps is a cognitive learning gap. Working to simplify the processes related to future library eBook use is a noble goal, but attempting to be sure that every reader has a basic understanding of the steps of the current processes leans into best practices. Multiple vendors, interfaces, and formats certainly complicate efforts to overcome this cognitive learning gap.¹⁰

Examining the timid or non-use of academic eBook users through considering these learning domain gaps can help library staff understand where a particular reader's difficulty might be overcome and even help make non-users into users. Plus, it has the added beneficial condition of being an ABC mnemonic: affective, behavioral, cognitive. For more complete consideration of eBook

usage (and non-usage) it is helpful to extend the schema into hardware and consider adding a “D,” as well: device. Printed books are largely platform independent, while eBooks require a device, or rather a defined combination of devices and software, in order to make them useful. Considering devices in relation to academic eBooks also brings in another host of potential affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning gaps. One of these gaps may indeed be users’ abilities to effectively use and manage their own devices. These gaps, coupled with consideration of the multiple uses that readers make of eBooks, make a dizzying array of combinations, some of which end in the sadness of incompatibility, while others can be relatively frictionless and even advantageous over their analog counterparts.

A FORCED EQUIVALENCE

One of the most effective strategies for partnering new and/or reluctant users with academic eBooks is acknowledging that paper books and eBooks (especially as they exist currently) are *not* directly equivalent. Any equivalence they have is a forced equivalence and the more that libraries can foreground this reality with new and/or reluctant users, the better. This type of honesty leans into the patron experience of academic eBooks and abandons any easy notions about accessibility.¹¹ As has been observed, a lot of information literacy instruction about eBooks looks to fill behavioral learning gaps, while a lot of user resistance to eBooks seems to reflect affective learning gaps. It is possible, however, that much of the mismatch between new and/or reluctant users and academic eBooks rests on a cognitive learning gap: the continuing error of assumed equivalence. Academic eBooks are simply not a direct equivalent to the same title printed and bound.

Depending on the context, eBooks can be vastly superior. The titles found in better interfaces with minimum digital rights management interference and linked tables of contents allow for more efficient workflows for some uses than their print counterparts. Full text searching along with the ability to directly copy and paste reasonable amounts of text can save time and effort which may be applied to other tasks. The ability (given a fairly specific set of circumstances) to access these books at nearly any distance at any time of the day or

night coupled with the reality that (voluminous) additional titles add no weight to the access device demonstrate some clear advantages that eBooks can have over their paper counterparts.¹²

The disadvantages of academic eBooks are also real and relevant to all readers. Printed books are generally considered superior for long form reading, and the (real or perceived) reading experience is less taxing than the known forms of screen reading.¹³ Paper books (once in the possession of the reader) are more reliable with no concerns about battery life, compatibility, and connectivity. It is also not insignificant that paper library books can be (albeit with certain penalties) kept a day or two past their due dates, while their electronic counterparts can be much less flexible with unfinished reading, incomplete assignments, and the like. Library staff would do well to understand and be ready to admit that eBooks are not a direct equivalent to paper books and to highlight the differences (including advantages and disadvantages) to readers. In many cases a reader may be better off with eBook version, depending upon their particular need and intended use. Again, the context of use and reader are vital in this calculus.

Articulating the different advantages of print and digital books can have additional benefits for the reader as well as for the relationship between the reader and the library staff. Looking at the relative benefits associated with format can help emphasize the kind of information need that a given user has. In a research environment, users may make assumptions about how much and what kind of access to a work they desire which may be somewhat disconnected for their actual need. Training researchers to better estimate their needs (and their time) can be both an entryway into eBook use and a way to reinforce effective research habits.¹⁴ Preparing readers who actually do require the entire text of a work to manage this forced equivalency in an academic eBook environment is truer to the experience of the reluctant eBook user. It is best to acknowledge to all readers that eBooks and print books of the same title are not directly equivalent; for the new and/or reluctant reader, it is obvious, helpful, and honest. The purchase or lease of eBook titles and packages needs to be carefully considered, as do the contexts, needs, and abilities of the readers for whom they are acquired so that every book may indeed have its reader.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to extend sincere apologies to Paul Simon, all the good people at Columbia Records, Warner Brothers Music, Kodak, and anyone who attended this presentation for the cringe-worthiness and derivative nature of this title. I may have a lot of excuses, but no really sound reason for choosing it. I regret it and appreciate your continued consideration despite it.
- 2 S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 2006), 315. Ranganathan was, of course, speaking to his own context, but this quote seems to encapsulate a lot about the experience of a shift to academic eBooks.
- 3 David W. Lewis, *Reimagining the Academic Library* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 155. Lewis acknowledges the difficulty and the long timeline of the task and of course this is one part, albeit a central part, of a larger argument he is making. The achievability of this task is suspect, unless librarians are comfortable with significantly diminishing access to considerable portions of their collections as many titles (including current titles) are not presently available in eBook form at any price. See: Aiping Chen-Gafney, “Transitioning to E-Books at a Medium-Sized Academic Library: Challenges and Opportunities—A Feasibility Study of a Psychology Collection,” in *Academic E-Books: Publishers, Librarians, and Users*, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016), 287–98, <https://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=626970>, especially pages 290, 295–6.
- 4 Richard Manly Adams, Jr., “Which Should We Buy?: Reconsidering Best Practices in the Purchase of Print versus Electronic Books in Theological Libraries,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 70 (2016): 283.
- 5 Joelle Thomas and Galadriel Chilton, “Library E-Book Platforms Are Broken: Let’s Fix Them,” in *Academic E-Books: Publishers, Librarians, and Users*, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016), 250, <https://www.oapen.org/search?identifier=626970>.

- 6 It is at this point that another apology is in order. I had hoped that this presentation would be eminently practical with several clear and easy steps to get new and/or reluctant eBook users to be on their merry digital way. In truth some fairly foundational theoretical realities prevented such a cheerful tidiness.
- 7 Timothy D. Lincoln, "Reading and E-Reading for Academic Work: Patterns and Preferences in Theological Studies and Religion," *Theological Librarianship* 6, no. 2 (2013): 43–44, <https://doi.org/10.31046/tl.v6i2.293>.
- 8 Tao Zhang and Xi Niu, "The User Experience of E-Books in Academic Libraries: Perception, Discovery, and Use," in *Academic E-Books: Publishers, Librarians, and Users*, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016), 210, <https://www.oopen.org/search?identifier=626970>.
- 9 Zhang and Niu, 218.
- 10 Librarians and users can certainly hope for a degree of industry standardization with regard to academic eBooks.
- 11 Adams, 287, 288.
- 12 Suzanne M. Ward and Rebecca A. Richardson, "Use and Cost Analysis of E-Books: Patron-Driven Acquisitions Plan vs. Librarian-Selected Titles," in *Academic E-Books: Publishers, Librarians, and Users*, Charleston Insights in Library, Archival, and Information Sciences (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016), 128, <https://www.oopen.org/search?identifier=626970>.
- 13 Zhang and Niu, 211.
- 14 Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 2016), 68.
- 15 Ranganathan, 299.