

DIKTUON: Purchasing at the Point of Need: An Acquisitions Pilot Project

by Leland R. Deeds

Purchasing e-books by collection is not a new acquisition strategy for academic libraries. Title sets and subject subsets are readily available for purchase, and even title-by-title purchasing of e-books has become more prevalent over the last couple years. User-driven e-book purchasing is not entirely new either. Many libraries allow patrons to request titles for purchase, even if it is only by filling out a paper form at the Circulation Desk. However, selecting both print and electronic titles, individually or by a profiling process, in order to offer them for purchase at the point of user need (through the library's online catalog or a vendor website) is still somewhat novel.

User-driven acquisitions, also known as demand-driven or patron-driven acquisitions (PDA), is a model of acquisitions where all standard library processes for selection have been followed but stopped just short of ordering. The library is still selecting the title, whether through an established profiling process, or individually. The library is still selecting the vendor to fulfill the order. The distinction is merely that the individual title is not finally purchased, whether print or e-book, until a user requests it. The final order occurs only at the point of need. In the case of e-books, this request is a "click" to read the title. For print titles, the request is a rush order.

In the fall of 2010, in response to an initial project proposal by the library's Head of Technical Services, the librarians at William Smith Morton Library, Union Presbyterian Seminary, began the process of a pilot patron-driven acquisition (PDA) project for both print and e-book titles. Though originally envisioned as a two-year pilot, the library has extended the project to at least three years. What follows is (1) a summary of our original goals, the implementation process the library followed, issues encountered and resolved, and the early initial data after the first year; (2) remaining issues we are pondering as we enter year two of the pilot; and (3) other opportunities that such a demand-driven model presents.

Like many libraries, the Morton Library continues to face challenging budgetary restrictions, stack space constraints, and an increasingly distributed user community with a growing desire for e-resources. These demands provided the operational context that helped establish the library's original goals for its PDA pilot. The Morton Library sought to introduce print and e-books with at-need purchasing, shift a percentage of selector-driven purchases from firm orders to PDA, and reduce overall processing cost and time by consolidating standing orders and firm orders with a single vendor.

Although the project deployed relatively smoothly we still ran into some issues. The site used as a model while discussing project implementation with the vendor was Arizona State University, a prior client. The Morton Library lacked the financial or human resources of a university research library, and there was some initial contention on how to proceed until we devised a satisfactory work-around using our ILS. Though ultimately successful, the initial profiling process also proved to be a challenge. Finally, the acquisitions workflow was not automated. Manual processing would be unsustainable if order requests ever became robust, and this still has not been addressed.¹

At the time of the pilot roll-out the library added approximately 1,000 bibliographic records into the catalog, each tied to either a print or electronic PDA title. We have roughly 720 print book records and 340 e-book records in the catalog. At the conclusion of the first year of the pilot, the library purchased 27 print titles through the PDA workflow and 16 PDA e-books, with an additional 17 e-book "first uses."

¹ For a more complete description of Union Presbyterian Seminary's PDA pilot see the 2013 *ATLA Summary of Proceedings*.

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We continue to see low levels of use. Because of these levels and a concern that this pattern may not shift until the most recent titles in our existing print collection age, the pilot has been extended by at least one year. We will be looking toward a third year for signs of stable increases in participation. We hope to see steady growth in use beginning in the second year as our user community becomes increasingly comfortable with the overall PDA process. As the Morton Library moves forward with the pilot we look forward to sharing our findings.

It is worth noting that our project continues to face several “environmental” issues that are shared by similar projects regardless of available local resources or chosen vendor(s). These issues fall into two categories: issues related to e-books as a book format, and issues related to collecting on a demand-driven basis.

One issue that users are quick to think of but libraries are in a difficult place to resolve is whether provided e-books will be available to be read on e-reader devices. Does the vendor platform support the use of any, a specific, or a variety of e-book reading devices? How does it handle “loans”? What about DRM? Should (or can) the library support the use of any, a specific, or a variety of e-book reading devices in-house? This is an issue and opportunity that in many ways public libraries are ahead of us on. The platform the Morton Library selected is browser-based. That is, an e-book is readable on any device that can be connected to the Internet via a web browser. We could have paid an additional fee on top of the premium cost of the e-book to offer a downloadable Kindle version, but we chose not to do so at this time.

There are other issues we have encountered relating to adding e-books to the library collection. For example, the world of library “loan-able” e-books is still a “wild West” kind of place. There are many publishers that sell e-books but do not allow libraries to offer them using a PDA model. Too, there are a significant number of publishers in religion and theology that do not even provide e-books as an option, at least for institutional purchase. (There are some signs that this market is slowly moving, however, as exemplified in Fortress Press’s recent release of an e-book catalog.)

Lingering at the back of all these issues is the fear that adding e-books to our user population’s existing reliance on and use of digitized course reserves and other e-resources will further negatively impact gate-counts and use of the print collection. On top of these e-centric concerns are elements linked to the underlying shift in what a library’s historic activity in selecting and collecting material for its community looks like as we move forward. How do we manage the unpredictable nature of a user-driven purchasing model on the budget? Put another way, how do we deal with unexpected institution-driven issues as the library tries to work with its budgeting authority through the highs and lows of user-driven purchasing? These are real concerns with very real consequences. Behind these financial concerns is the suggestion that the PDA model is only further empowering the fundamental shift of “access over ownership” in library collection activities.

Yes, there are many unknowns. But the land of patron-driven purchasing is not just a place of issues, concerns, and woes. It is also a land of opportunities. A PDA model allows a library to aggressively focus core purchasing while radically expanding the scope of subject areas available to its users, sometimes allowing for quite unexpected selections. This model supports user needs in ways that “just in case” purchasing could never allow. Another area we are just beginning to discuss is what serials purchasing might look like using a PDA model. Last but not least, as libraries seek to demonstrate to local administrations that PDA models might allow for budget control and expanded subject-area access for users, there may also be opportunities to shift and refocus library staff workloads. As the level of historic copy cataloging or acquisitions “check-in” of material declines, the need to address born-digital materials increases. Too, an institution’s needs might spur the local library’s efforts into new areas such as an institutional repository or digital collections.