

Book Review: Ebooks in Education: Realising the Vision

Woodward, Hazel (ed.)
London: Ubiquity Press.
ISBN: 978-1-90918-837-2

Available as open access in several formats as well as in print.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bal>

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www.i-a-l.co.uk/resource_ebook2015.html

The upbeat title promises much, and this is taken up by Madeleine Atkins of HEFCE in the Foreword, although more realistically she notes that "This publication by Jisc Collections describes very lucidly the current state of ... a transition". So unfortunately, this rather slight volume does not deliver a completely convincing vision of the future through its "really eye-opening examples, [where] we see how ebooks have been incorporated successfully into educational practice, improving the learning experience for students, particularly students with disabilities and distance learners. We see exciting partnerships with research institutes, the development and promotion of an ebook app, the creation of an open living book, and new collaborations with ebook publishers and vendors to provide access to e-textbooks to students." If, as she continues "[s]uch success stories reflect well on ebooks more generally, showing us that they are reaching the level of maturity needed for widespread adoption," readers would do well to note that this is reaching maturity and realising the vision - we are not quite there yet! At first sight, some of the chapters (eight essays if, as the publisher does, you include the Foreword, and seven case studies) are surprisingly short: half of them are less than four pages in length and three only just make it to over two pages.

I read and reviewed the online version in which the 94 pages include 12 blank pages (including one unexplained facing pair) and some very patchy text flow round images which leads to several other empty half pages. I can only assume that the print version, which is advertised on Amazon as having significantly more pages (actually 53% more), must use a much larger font than the rather small screen font.

But, to the content...

Ebooks as strategic priorities for university managers is a good place for the book to begin. However, the Jisc were given evidence some years ago by the Jisc ebooks Observatory that student use of e-textbooks and ebooks was ineffectual - by dipping for information nuggets rather than through study and reading, to the extent that some academics refused to push students towards the e-versions - so it is good to read in David Scott's look at the Further Education sector that negative staff attitudes are lessening and that ebooks are being used as a "teaching tool, either in class sessions with an electronic whiteboard or building their use into online learning activities or assessments" ... although perhaps it is not totally true to say as does Christine Fyfe in her strategic priorities essay that ebooks offer "the exciting possibility of enhancing the student experience - what it is like to be a

student - and producing better educated students" [my emphasis]. Her two other strategic drivers - to drive innovation in learning, teaching and research; and to help to use space and human resources more effectively and efficiently - are less contentious and highlight an issue not often mentioned, namely the seamless coherence which ebooks offer course design.

From the Open University, we read of the value of ebooks for distance learners, but also of some frequently asked questions about access - why do students have to go to so many different places to access ebooks and why do they all look and feel different. The authors suggest that many of the same challenges faced by distance learners will "be increasingly relevant to the sector as a whole, as online learning moves from margin to mainstream" and the theme appears again in the following essay where a "dirty dozen pain points" relating to ebooks are given. In one of the longer essays, Suzanne Enright looked at the learning and teaching perspective but, in passing, noted the importance of advocacy to promote digital resources in addition to their "integrated management and discovery of the digital collection ... through the Ex Libris suite, with its Primo service" and the fact that "aggregators such as CourseSmart and VitalSource prefer conversations directly with academic colleagues to promote a 1 to 1 student textbook model" - something of a challenge to the library model!

There is an essay on ebooks and accessibility - interestingly co-authored by Jisc's recently dismantled TechDis - which includes a checklist for publishers, and another on the mobile user experience with a five-point mobile manifesto for ebooks. The final essay, 'Ebooks acquisition as a shared service' by John Tuck starts unpromisingly with a reference to Sullivan's 2011 Academic library autopsy report, 2050 but goes on to look at E-BASS25 (Ebooks Acquisition as a shared service in M25) and its examination of patron driven acquisition (PDA) and evidence-based selection (EBS) models.

And for those willing to learn from the experiences of their peers, there are the case studies: a ten-year success story from the University of Portsmouth; the success of PDA at the University of Sussex; the beginnings of open access publishing programme at the University of St Andrews; Coleg Sir Gâr's (SW Wales) development of a Library App to bring the library closer to its users; Harvard University's open access guru Peter Suber describing the development process of a non-enhanced open access ebook; Plymouth University's successful ebook programme; and Coventry University's pilot project for e-textbooks. By my reckoning, this amounts to about 27 years' worth of experience!

Finally, it might seem a pity - given her long association with university libraries, university presses and ebooks - that there is nothing visible of the editor within the text. I confess to starting this review a little disenchanted with the book, mostly due to apparently skimpy chapters and poor formatting, but there is a lot of value within these chapters - some of which I have highlighted - and I think that editor Hazel Woodward has selected wisely and wisely left the result to speak for itself.

Professor Atkins also writes in the Foreword, "As students' demands change, a transition to the print book's successor, the ebook, therefore seems both necessary and inevitable" - but I find myself increasingly asking - if publishers cannot do the job properly (and this

book is a case in point with its headings at the foot of pages and its poor formatting) should transition be both inevitable and necessary? There are - self-evidently - "significant challenges that ebooks have yet to overcome, most chiefly around functionality, curation and access" (one author even wrote that there" are continuing and even increasing concerns about the processes involved in the management and delivery of ebooks, relating both to library functions and to the end-user experience") and only a very few ebooks meet the oft-stated student requirements, highlighted by the ebooks Observatory project over five years ago, of providing title-specific (useful but expensive) rather than platform-generic (rarely used but cheap to offer) added-value functionality. Something also pointed up here in Suzanne Enright's essay when she quoted a second year medical student at Warwick Medical School who, at the 2013 UKSG Conference, "(politely) took publishers and librarians to task for simply not moving fast enough to give him what he wants"! She ends her essay, "The big question is how and when we can all reimagine content so that the norm for ebooks is that they have become true 'natively digital' in origin, with imaginative built-in interactivity features and multimedia elements, including video and 3D objects, to enhance the learning experience, rather than being a more or less faithful electronic version of a traditional print textbook with all the drawbacks inherent in that." If there is one message to come out of this slim volume it is that more needs to be done - and done quickly - if ebooks are to truly succeed in fields other than fiction.