

Getting to grips with developing and managing e-book collections: an introduction

Chris Armstrong, University of Birmingham, 16th May

This interesting and thought-provoking workshop took place in the Learning Centre at the University of Birmingham, and was presented by Chris Armstrong. Chris runs a consultancy, research and training company called Information Automation Limited, and has an impressive biography in the area of e-publishing, having recently completed work for both JISC and the Welsh Government Assembly on the use of e-books in academic and public libraries. He was therefore able to underpin the theoretical aspect of the day with some recent research findings about consumer attitudes to e-books in practice. Chris's colleague Ray Lonsdale, who should have been co-presenting, was unfortunately ill, so Chris did the whole session on his own. Despite this he was able to maintain a lively pace, mixing presentation with hands-on and more interactive sessions, so that by the end of the day we felt that we had covered the topic very thoroughly.

The audience came from a mixture of academic, public and specialist library backgrounds, and Chris pitched the content of the course as very much a general overview of the subject, an approach that seemed to suit most of the participants. From a personal point of view, as the manager of a number of site libraries in an HE institution, I was interested in the issues raised by

e-books in the management of a physical library, and how the increasing provision of e-books might affect usage patterns of students, as well as the different types of services and support that they might start to demand.

After some discussion about the definition of an e-book, Chris's first session was about publishing trends in e-books, and it quickly became clear that this is a very diverse market, covering academic publishers, aggregators such as Ebrary and NetLibrary, library suppliers and bookshops, as well as some free initiatives, including social or self-publishing. After some interesting and varied hands-on investigation of some of these different types of providers, we broke for lunch. Reconvening for the afternoon session, we looked at the practical aspects of e-books for users, including the reading interface, navigation, and special features such as interactivity or built in reference tools. The next section covered the practical aspects of exploiting e-books for librarians, such as access, cataloguing, currency, authentication etc. We then moved on to the thorny issue of licensing and the different models of acquiring e-books, before ending the day with a discussion of how to promote and market e-books within our library collections.

It's hard to summarise briefly what I learned from the day as it was so packed with information. Topics I found particularly interesting included the idea of publishers marketing individual chapters from their books; allowing institutions to buy specific resources for their individual courses; or perhaps enabling students to present their e-readers at the beginning of the session to have all their course material loaded for the coming session. The discussion of lending e-books from public libraries was also fascinating. Being a very reluctant e-reader myself, and very wedded to the printed book as part of my life, I was also interested in the issues of readability and user interfaces. There are concerns in academic circles about whether students learn or concentrate well when reading from a screen. Chris's study revealed that students mainly used e-books to get brief information or quick facts, and not for sustained reading, and some people had commented that it's easier to work from several sources if you have lots of books open around you on a desk. Chris's conclusion was that the development of e-books does not spell the end of

the printed book for quite some time, if ever, even in the academic context.

It was also clear from the range of resources we looked at that the potential of e-books, particularly those 'born digital' rather than simply transcribed from printed versions, is exciting, opening up new ways of presenting information in interactive formats. It was also fascinating to see that some of the free resources available are also the most innovative, such as the Penguin "We Tell Stories" initiative, in which six authors wrote e-books based on classic titles, using different techniques to involve the reader, such as linking the text to interactive maps of London where the action takes place. For librarians, e-books will clearly present many exciting challenges for the future.

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