

The practical and psychological transition to e-textbooks

Adam Brown
Director of Research
Auckland Institute of Studies
adamb@ais.ac.nz

Introduction

This paper describes, in a chronological fashion, the development of thinking and practice about the provision of textbooks at Auckland Institute of Studies (AIS). The stages can be divided into five, and it can be seen that the process has almost come full-circle, such that the situation at the final stage is similar to that at the first. The transition to e-textbooks has taken place recently, and that is the focus of this paper. AIS has been told that it is the only tertiary institution in New Zealand to adopt a policy of ebook textbooks.

AIS is New Zealand's largest private tertiary institution, established in 1990. At postgraduate level, it has New Zealand's largest MBA programme, and conducts undergraduate Bachelor and Diploma programmes in International Business, Tourism Management, Hospitality Management, and Information Technology. There is also an English Language Centre conducting Foundation and English for Academic Purposes programmes.

AIS is rather different from other tertiary institutions, in that the majority of its students are international. Between 80 and 85% are international. The largest groups are from India and China, then the Pacific islands (especially Tonga), and then from various other regions: Southeast Asia, the Middle East, etc. The 15 to 20% of students who are categorised as domestic are mostly people from overseas who have gained New Zealand citizenship or permanent residence recently, and are thus similar in many ways to international students.

Student numbers wax and wane, often because of factors outside AIS's control: currency exchange rates, visa regulations, etc. At their heyday, student numbers on first-year courses can be over 100, whereas at other times courses run with numbers as low as ten. If student numbers fall below this, consideration is given to cancelling the course because it is not cost-effective.

While student numbers on postgraduate programmes (MBA, Postgraduate Diploma in Business Administration) have grown recently, the majority of AIS students are at undergraduate level. This paper describes the provision of undergraduate textbooks and other materials, although reference to postgraduate programmes (which are run along rather different lines) are made.

Stage 1: Workbooks

Until 2009, students were not issued with textbooks. Instead, lecturers prepared workbooks consisting of:

- PowerPoint slides from their lectures
- photocopied readings from books
- original notes and exercises

These were prepared by the lecturers, photocopied and spiral-bound in-house (although some larger ones were sent to commercial printers), and issued to all enrolled students on a course.

The advantages of such a system were that lecturers would prepare materials that were precisely related to what was covered on the course – no more, no less. Extra copies of the workbooks, if student enrolments exceeded expectations, could be prepared in-house at short notice. Costs were kept to a minimum, as photocopying and binding (whether done in-house or outside) are inexpensive.

The disadvantages included that copyright regulations restricted the amount that could be used from published textbooks etc. PowerPoint slides in the workbooks were often those given free-of-charge by textbook publishers; these were often little more than PowerPoint versions of the headings and subheadings of the textbook. Students often had to resort to reading these textbooks using AIS library copies, and regularly complained that not enough copies were held by the library.

Since students were expected to buy a personal copy of the prescribed textbook for each course, AIS arranged for the University Bookshop (UBS) of the University of Auckland to come to AIS and sell textbooks. However, most students tried to avoid expense by not purchasing the textbooks. Instead, the expectation arose that the AIS library would stock multiple copies of each textbook for students to consult and/or borrow. This was impractical, as AIS offers around 50 courses each semester.

Stage 2: Issued hardcopy textbooks

In 2009, the decision was made to solve the overriding problem of complaints about library holdings, by issuing each enrolled student on a course with the hardcopy textbook. The cost of this was covered by a resource fee (per student per course) which included the textbook, as well as various other resources such as internet and Wi-Fi access; access to library electronic resources including ProQuest, EBSCO, ABI/Inform, Safari Business and Techbooks databases; copyright charges and a printing allowance; and, for applicable programmes, NZQA credit fees, class trips and training cafeteria supplies. Previously, the non-textbook aspects of this had been included in the tuition fee; however, a separate resource fee was introduced at this stage.

While this led to all students having the textbooks, and the student complaints about the library holdings disappearing almost overnight, two largely insuperable problems arose.

Firstly, hardcopy textbooks have to be ordered in advance and, in some cases, quite far in advance, in order to be sure that they will be delivered for the beginning of semester. If UBS had copies in stock in Auckland or at their other branches in New Zealand, they would be delivered within a few days. If UBS had to order the books from publishers' branches in Australia, they would arrive in one or two weeks. However, if the books were only available from the UK, USA, etc, they might take up to five weeks (which is almost half the 12-week semester) to arrive.

Secondly, it was very difficult to provide an accurate figure for student numbers (ie textbook numbers) two months in advance. This has since been alleviated by requiring returning students to enrol, or at least express their intentions, towards the end of the preceding semester. Nevertheless, numbers are still not perfectly accurate and top-ups have to be ordered. As stated above, depending on the book, this may take up to five weeks to arrive. If that was the case, former students were invited to sell back their copies second-hand to AIS.

Stage 3: Issued e-textbooks

When I took over the job of ordering student textbooks in 2014, these problems became very apparent, not least because the textbook-ordering process took up much of my working time. The decision was therefore taken to transfer to e-textbooks, as far as possible, for 2015. The bulk of this paper therefore describes this transition.

A “Bring your own device” (BYOD) policy was established and advertised for existing and new students. Ebooks are delivered by the issue of individual codes for the online download of ebooks onto the student’s device.

Writers (of both peer-reviewed articles, and unreviewed websites, blogs, etc) have provided many lists of the pros and cons of ebooks (eg Wikipedia, n.d.). These can be viewed from various perspectives.

Environmentalism

From the environmental point of view, it is obvious that hardcopy books consume vast amounts of paper etc from trees, whereas ebooks consume none of this.

In addition, overproduced hardcopy books (eg through poor sales, or the publication of a new edition) have to be recycled. This does not happen with ebooks.

Readers

From the consumer’s (reader’s) point of view, there are both pros and cons of ebooks. There are two overwhelming advantages. Firstly, hardcopy textbooks are often 400 pages or longer, and may weigh a couple of kg. Undergraduate students typically take three courses per semester and, if they have classes on all three courses in a day, may be carrying several kgs in textbooks. Needless to say, three ebooks weigh nothing, over and above the weight of the device they are stored on. (Laptops typically weigh under 4 kg, some much lighter than this.) This has also reduced the student demand for lockers.

Secondly, if student numbers are underestimated, or if students arrive late for semester, top-ups can be ordered immediately, and are usually delivered within a day – sometimes even within an hour! This compares with the possibility of a five-week wait for hardcopy books.

Other advantages of ebooks include that, provided students look after their devices, ebooks are durable. They do not wear out or become torn or dog-eared, you cannot mark them with accidental coffee stains, they do not burn, and you are less likely to leave them on the bus.

Hyperlinks proved a huge advantage of ebooks over hardcopy. Such hyperlinks may take the reader to an online dictionary (especially useful with AIS’s international students), GPS, videos, and other internet-related material.

It is much easier to find something in an ebook than in a hardcopy textbook. Search functions allow you to navigate, scan, browse, etc. Students often like to write notes in hardcopy books, or highlight particular passages or words. In an ebook, these notes and highlights are also searchable.

Handicapped readers are also better served by ebooks. Text-to-speech functions can help the visually handicapped. They are also helped by the fact that ebooks can be zoomed in to, ie the font can in effect be enlarged.

All the above advantages can be enjoyed provided the student has a device. An informal survey in the semester before implementation of ebooks showed that every student had a laptop, and about half also had an iPad. These devices can of course be used not just for the storage and reading of ebooks, but also for many other functions (connecting to the internet, preparing assignments in Microsoft Word, with graphs in Microsoft Excel, etc).

There are few disadvantages of ebooks for students. Like lecturers, students may be emotionally attached to the feel and smell of a hardcopy book. As Abram, writing in 2010, said, “people say that the feel of a book, its leather cover, and the heft in your hands are like an aphrodisiac to them.” However, Kasdorf (2014) states that “[p]ast surveys have established the perception that students prefer print, but recent ones show that is about to change.”

Battery life between charges is an important factor for electronic devices. It depends very much on the particular model, but even the longest last only about eight hours. AIS has addressed this problem by installing power points in the library, café and other rooms, for students to recharge their devices. Another consideration is the battery life before it needs replacing. The average life of the battery before it needs replacing is around four years.

Eye strain is another potential problem if devices are looked at for long periods, such as when reading an ebook. Various websites give advice for minimising this.

When hardcopy textbooks were issued to students, at the end of their programme (eg a Bachelor with 21 courses), they would have 21 textbooks. Unlike hardcopy books, ebooks have no resale value. Equally, hardcopy textbooks were often unsellable as second-hand books, as students in future runs of the courses would be issued with the textbooks, and second-hand bookshops would only take one or two copies of any title.

Lecturers

From the point of view of lecturers, the main advantage is knowing that every student has a copy of the prescribed textbook. However, do they read it as much, and in the same way, as a hardcopy textbook?

Rashbass (2012) reports differences in the way people read *The Economist* magazine when it was made available in e-version for reading on Kindle or iPad. He describes three stages. At first, readers preferred to stay with the print version. They adopted a “lean back” approach “whereby intellectually curious people feed their insatiable curiosity about the world in their desire to be well and broadly informed about current affairs, business, science, technology, culture and the arts and the connections between them.” However, this changed into a “lean forward” approach, one where readers are skimming and scanning, “snacking” on articles rather than reading them. Research by Weinreich, Obendorf, Herder and Mayer (2008) showed how little time readers spent on webpages (Nielsen, 2008):

- 10,163 page views (17%) that lasted less than 4 seconds. In such brief “visits,” users clearly bounced right out without truly “using” the page.
- 2,615 page views (4%) that lasted more than 10 minutes. In these cases, users almost certainly left the browser open while doing something else.
- 1,558 page views (3%) with fewer than 20 words on them. Such pages are probably server errors or disrupted downloads.

Rashbass, writing in 2012, believed that a move back to “lean back” reading was taking place with e-texts, and that it may provide an even better reading experience than print.

In an educational setting, Martinez-Estrada and Conaway (2012) report the findings of a survey of students of a Mexican university. In terms of how they felt ebooks had affected their learning experience, 75% responded it was better, 23% were indifferent, and only 2% said it was worse. In terms of learning outcomes (end-of-course satisfaction, successful learning and grades), 94% reported the experience was better with ebooks. In terms of whether they felt ebooks would be easy to use for the new generation of students, “[n]early three fourths of the students in our study indicated that they preferred the eBook version of their textbook to the printed version” (p.133).

If students read ebooks the same way as hardcopy textbooks, feel that it gives a better learning experience, and leads to better grades, then surely this is something that lecturers should be championing. However, there are still some negative reactions to ebooks.

The inertia of changing from hardcopy to ebooks, seen above for some students, may also be seen in some lecturers. However, it is clear that sooner or later, (almost) all books will be ebooks; or, as Basch foresaw in the words of the title of her 2000 article, “Ebooks? Eventually”. This is something that lecturers (and bookshops) need to embrace. Andy Ross (bookseller, quoted in Crovitz, 2010, p. 127) anticipated, “there is going to be a tipping point where eBooks become the dominant medium, thus ending 500 years of the Gutenberg Age.”

Ebooks may not completely take over from textbooks in all subject areas. Martinez-Estrada and Conaway (2012) reported teaching staff believing that “the e-textbook may not be suitable for courses such as accounting or other scientific, engineering, or mathematics courses, which require extensive paper work with accounting problems or scientific or mathematics problems.” It is debatable whether this means that ebooks (or e-materials) are simply unsuitable for these subjects and therefore hardcopy textbooks must be retained, or a rethink of the electronic possibilities for teaching these subjects is called for (see below). While double-entry book-keeping is a standard practice in accounting, this does not necessarily mean hardcopy book-keeping nowadays, and increasingly electronic software such as *Mind Your Own Business* (MYOB, n.d.) is used.

Do ebooks lead to a change in the way a lecturer teaches in class? If the textbook is not used in class, but only as supplementary reading outside class, then there is no change. Even if textbooks are used in class, this simply means that students are reading something on a screen rather than on a page. There seems to be no good reason for the lecturer to need to change the content or style of their teaching.

Publishers

While hardcopy books are unlikely to disappear altogether in the near future, ebooks represent an ever increasing proportion of publishers’ sales.

Publishers should welcome the transition to ebooks, as there are several operational processes that are made redundant. Firstly, publishers do not need to deal with printers. With hardcopy books, publishers produce (and subcontract to a layout company) the layout of the book with pages, graphics, etc. This is still known as camera-ready copy, even though cameras have not been used in the process for a long time; instead, digital files are given to the printer. For

ebooks, camera-ready copy is the final product, perhaps with additional digital enhancement features such as hyperlinks.

Copies of ebooks do not need to be stored in a warehouse, with the accompanying risks of pilferage, damage by fire, water, rodents, etc.

Orders for ebooks do not need to be compiled, packaged and freighted. Over-ordered books or copies damaged in transit do not need to be returned by freight.

When new editions of books are produced (a common feature of textbooks, especially in fast-changing fields such as IT), copies of the old edition do not need to be disposed of.

As a result of all the above stages, which are not needed for ebooks, the price of ebooks should be much less than that of hardcopy books.

Institutions

The main purpose of this article is to describe the pros and cons of ebooks from the point of view of the educational institution.

The main advantage is that ebooks eliminate the two problems with hardcopy textbooks outlined above: the lead time between having to order the books (some of which might take five weeks to arrive) and the start of semester; and the difficulty of ordering top-ups of under-ordered books (again, some of which might take five weeks to arrive). The bottom line is: “Can the institution guarantee that enrolled students will have a copy of the textbook on day 1 of semester (or very shortly afterwards)?” With hardcopy, the answer is no; with ebooks, it is yes.

The procedure adopted was as follows. Two months before semester, contact was made with publishers to check whether textbooks were available in e-version, or whether they would still have to be ordered in hardcopy. If they were only available in hardcopy, then they would have to be ordered this far in advance. In the February 2015 semester, only seven out of 48 textbooks were not available as ebooks. If the publisher could guarantee that they were available as ebooks, then they need not be ordered at that time, but rather shortly before the start of semester, allowing the institution to have more accurate student numbers. Even so, the decision was taken to deliberately order only about two-thirds or three-quarters of the required number, because it is easier to order top-ups than to return over-ordered codes.

In the first two weeks of semester, top-ups of ebook download codes could be ordered, and they usually arrived within one day – and sometimes even within one hour.

When only hardcopy textbooks were used, a courier delivery van would arrive and offload several heavy boxes of textbooks. These then had to be stored in the library (whose staff had the task of issuing them), and sorted ready for distribution to students. In other words, there is a huge reduction in space required for the storage of ebook codes versus hardcopy textbooks.

As was noted above, ebooks cost much less than hardcopy books. In fact, this was not a major consideration for the institution in the transition to student ebooks, as the cost is passed on to the students. The cost of textbooks, along with several other recourses listed above, is covered by a resource fee, which is adjusted periodically. Once the transition to ebooks is complete, this fee will no doubt be lowered.

The above points were the overriding advantages of e-textbooks, and in general the transition went smoothly. However, there are some disadvantages of e-textbooks to the institution. Firstly, students are presumably more prone to the temptation of plagiarism or overcopying, because they have a soft copy of the whole of the textbook. All students are given introductory sessions on these topics, and all students' written work is put through Turnitin (n.d.), which checks their submitted work against a huge database of material comprising internet webpages, books, articles, newspapers, etc. Despite students knowing this, some students nevertheless plagiarise or overcopy, sometimes deliberately and sometimes because of lack of understanding of academic practices.

Students are allowed to change course within the first two weeks of semester, although they are strongly encouraged, and are given guidance, to plan their study not just for the coming semester, but for the following two or three. If, after receiving the textbook, they do change course, there is no problem with hardcopy textbooks: they simply return the book, and the library staff check that it is still in pristine condition, that they have not written anything in it, etc. However, with ebooks, one of two things may happen. Firstly, if the student says that they have not downloaded the book, an administrator has to check with the publisher that this is true, before issuing the code for the new course, and reusing the original code for the first course. Secondly, students are warned when codes are issued that, once used to download an ebook, they are not returnable or refundable. Nevertheless, one student in the February 2015 semester downloaded the ebook, then changed course, and had to pay a resource fee again in order to receive the textbook for the second course.

The way in which publishers supplied ebooks (codes) differed greatly. The major publishers seemed well aware of the need to join the ebook revolution, and had ebook versions of textbooks ready. Some even took this as the opportunity to convert some of their titles into ebooks, specially for AIS. Most of these used the VitalSource (n.d.) platform, a freely downloadable program that facilitates the download and management of ebooks on the user's device.

Other publishers supplied download codes, but they were not downloaded through VitalSource.

Some publishers, including surprisingly specialist IT book publishers, seemed poorly set up for supplying ebooks. Two such IT publishers required AIS to email them a spreadsheet with the names and email addresses of enrolled students, and they would then email codes to the students' email addresses.

In terms of invoicing AIS for the codes, some publishers seemed only to be set up to provide single copies of ebooks, eg novels for reading on a Kindle (Amazon Kindle, n.d.) device, whereas AIS required class sets of perhaps 50 e-textbooks to be read on any device, especially laptops and iPads.

By now, it should be obvious to the reader that there are many administrative headaches involved in supplying students with textbooks, and transitioning to ebooks. When hardcopy books were used in the past, most of these problems were solved by using UBS as a one-stop bookshop for all supplies, although there were still complications caused by the inherent problem of under- or over-ordering. With e-textbooks, AIS had to contact publishers directly (a total of nine), in addition to UBS for the hardcopy books. It was suggested to UBS that

they should set themselves up as a one-stop ebookshop too, in the same way as specialist ebook suppliers such as eBooks.com (n.d.) and other online booksellers such as Amazon (n.d.). They are in the process of doing so and, once established, AIS will probably use them again for all textbook supplies, in order to avoid the administrative hassle. It is also in the bookshop's interest to offer ebooks; for example, in the final semester of 2014, UBS had 100% of AIS's custom, whereas in Semester 1 of 2015 this dropped to 15% (seven out of 48 titles).

Stage 4: Back to workbooks

Stage 3 is where AIS is at present for undergraduate textbooks. While issuing each enrolled student with a copy of the textbook (as an ebook, wherever possible) has resolved the problem of students complaining that the library did not have enough copies of relevant books, it can be seen that the process of ordering, receiving and issuing textbooks, and dealing with under- and over-ordered books/codes takes up a large amount of time for administrative personnel.

Two further problems have become apparent with the supplying of textbooks to students. The first is that, despite several announcements to the contrary, students try to claim a refund by not collecting their textbook(s). AIS will normally swap one issued textbook (whether hardcopy or ebook) for another, provided the hardcopy is in pristine condition or the download code has not been used. Similarly, refunds will be given if the student drops the course. However, once a student is enrolled on a course, AIS policy is that refunds will only be given in two circumstances. Firstly, if a student is repeating a course, they already have the book, and therefore do not need another copy the second time. Secondly, as a catch-all category, refunds will be given on compassionate grounds in exceptional circumstances on a case-by-case basis, such as an accident or serious illness; this does not include that the student did not bother to collect the book.

The second problem is that, while students are issued with textbooks, and lecturers make use of them in class, for assignments, etc, it has been found that many students do not read the book, either at all or hardly at all.

A further consideration is that it is sometimes difficult for lecturers to find any published book that does precisely what the lecturer needs it to do. This includes not covering too much content for the 12-week course; not covering too little; covering it in the same way that the lecturer teaches the course; being of relevance to students in a New Zealand institution (many of whom intend to stay in New Zealand upon graduation); containing relevant case studies, relevant aspects of New Zealand law, etc.

In view of these problems, a reversion to the previous situation (Stage 1: Workbooks) is being considered. In a nutshell, why should AIS go to the trouble of supplying textbooks to students if they do not read and use them, and if the books do not quite fulfil lecturers' needs? In fact, this solution has already been applied by the postgraduate (MBA) programme, where it is more relevant primarily because the courses are shorter than (roughly one third the length of) undergraduate courses. Textbooks, which may be a few hundred pages long, are therefore too much. Instead, most MBA courses have reverted to workbooks prepared by the lecturer, along very similar lines to the Stage 1 undergraduate workbooks described above.

In fact, such workbooks already exist for one or two undergraduate courses, especially the more practical, less theoretical ones. Such a workbook exists for the first-semester academic

writing course, and it contains many practical writing exercises. Similarly, a first-year introductory course on the place of computers in business has a practical component (Microsoft Office) with an accompanying workbook with exercises.

If such workbooks are introduced widely, the library can more efficiently focus its holdings to include multiple copies of textbooks that would have been the issued textbooks, along with supplementary reading.

Of course, such workbooks have to be prepared by the lecturers, a process that may encounter some opposition. The workbooks also have to be updated from time to time. However, we can point to existing workbooks such as for academic writing (which is upgraded and updated almost every semester) and for introduction to computers (which necessarily has to be updated regularly because of changes in technology).

Workbooks can be sent out to printing forms to be copied before the semester, thus freeing up administrators' time. Equally importantly, top-ups of smaller numbers can easily be run off in-house; thus students get their workbooks within a day or two.

Stage 5: Apps

If lecturers prepare workbooks, especially those that include a number of practical exercises, then they can easily be converted into apps by specialist companies. These apps can then be distributed, free or for a price, in the same way as ebooks, and read on devices.

Apps like this for courses have the advantage that they are prepared by the lecturer and therefore contain precisely the content that the lecturer wants. They can also be updated regularly and easily.

A debate has been ongoing for several years over whether ebooks that are simply ebook versions of the hardcopy textbook (in the same way that a photocopy is a copy of a book in a different format) is adequate, or whether ebooks should contain various digitally-based enhancements that are simply impossible with hardcopy. These include hyperlinks to the internet, links to other places in the same book, GPS-connection, embedded videos, etc. In other words, the ebook should use the features made available by being digital, and be more than a digital version of the book. Apps are especially suitable for incorporating these enhancements.

Conclusion

It can be seen that the provision of textbooks at AIS has almost come full circle. In the first stage, workbooks were prepared and textbooks were used as supplementary reading. Then, in order to address criticisms about the holdings of textbooks in the library, a (hardcopy) textbook was issued to each enrolled student for each course. However, the provision of hardcopy textbooks has inherent problems in the lead time required to order books, often from overseas, and the difficulty of acquiring top-ups of under-ordered books in a reasonable timeframe. These problems have been solved by the institutional policy of using e-textbooks, wherever possible. Despite teething problems, the transition has been smooth. We are currently at this stage.

Future developments include reverting to workbooks prepared by lecturers, and the possibility of providing this material, along with substantial digital enhancements, as apps.

Perhaps the most interesting question in the field of textbooks and supplementary reading material is the balance between (i) textbooks, whether supplied as hardcopy or ebooks, (ii) workbooks and other materials, whether printed or digital, prepared and supplied by the lecturer, and (iii) library holdings, whether as hardcopy books on the shelves, or ebooks available from the library or via online databases. Indeed, with the digital revolution, the whole nature and purpose of institutional libraries needs to be reassessed. It seems clear that we shall see fewer and fewer hardcopy books on shelves, and more and more digital access to materials, that is, internet-linked computers, in libraries. The bottom line is that libraries are there in order to help students study and learn. The question is how librarians and teaching staff can coordinate the availability of inputs in order to maximise this learning for students. As rapid advances in technology take place, and the new platforms and delivery mechanisms become available, this question needs to be addressed almost year by year. Writing in 2010, Abram jubilantly wrote, "It's a great time to be a librarian participating in the creation of new plateaus for reading, books, education, culture, entertainment, enjoyment, and more. And it's going to get more exciting, not less, in the coming years."

One thing is certain: nothing is going to stand still in this field, and the sooner institutions, libraries and teaching staff embrace the changes that have taken place recently and will continue to take place, the better the opportunities afforded by these changes can be appreciated and maximised, for the benefit of learners.

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