The Trials and Tribulations of Providing eBooks: A Small University Library Perspective

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Introduction

Academic libraries have been providing eBooks to their users since the year 2000. At least that is the first mention that I find of eBooks in articles and presentations by academic librarians. In those sources, I also find the words "havoc," "chaos," and the phrase "took over my life" (Anderson). It is true that managing eBooks is mentally challenging. Granted, there are advantages: there is no need for processing an eBook and in many cases cataloging the book is easy as well, with vendor-provided bibliographic records. The challenges with eBooks are undisclosed, vexing aspects such as uploading them to an integrated library system, mediating patron access, near-constant management of the electronic collection, and all the other little technical things that most of us were unprepared for when we adopted eBooks into our collections. eBooks and their management became full-time jobs for many of us. The adoption of this format changed the way technical services departments were configured and led to the Electronic Resources Librarian position descriptions I see every day in the ALA Joblist. We experienced these implementation problems at my small university library. To put our experiences with eBooks in perspective, here is a description of my library and our implementation process.

The duPont-Ball Library serves Stetson University, a small university in central Florida, with an FTE of 3,150. The library serves primarily undergraduate students enrolled in majors in the arts, sciences, music, and business, as well as supporting a handful of graduate programs in education and business.

In 2005, the library adopted eBooks into its collections by first subscribing to two reference eBook databases, Credo and Oxford Reference. Galvanized by the usage of those two databases, and intrigued by the possibility of saving money, we next subscribed to what was then the ebrary Academic Collection. When we subscribed in 2008, the collection consisted of about 44,000 academic, instructional, and popular book titles. Paying one subscription price for such a large collection gave library users many more monographic options for their research needs and saved the library a great deal of money.

After implementing the subscription eBook collection, we quickly noticed that title requests from faculty were not being fulfilled by the subscription eBook collection. As with most academic libraries, we rely on our faculty to help build our monograph and journal collections. We encourage our faculty to submit title requests and we push *Choice* book reviews to them via email for selection. We needed another way to fulfill individual faculty title requests and still save money. That is when we discovered demand-driven acquisition.

Demand-Driven Acquisition (DDA) for eBooks

In 2012 I published an article in *College and Research Libraries News* on the duPont-Ball Library's experience with individual titles in a demand-driven eBook collection with ebrary (Dinkins, 249-252, 255). We began our experience with DDA by creating a profile for subject collections matching publisher, subject, and price criteria set up in the ebrary interface. Then it occurred to me that adding individual faculty title requests to our DDA collection could also save us money. We would not pay for the title unless a purchase was triggered by usage. Previously in my career, I devoted a semester-long sabbatical to a research project comparing circulation statistics for print book titles selected by faculty to those of titles selected by librarians. The results of the project led me to believe that many of our faculty chose books merely because the reviews looked interesting. The titles were not always being assigned in courses, and many faculty selections studied in the sabbatical project had never circulated. Based on these results, I had a good feeling that adding individual title selections to the DDA eBook collection would save the library money, because the majority of the titles would never be triggered for purchase.

> **"Our users are used to a seamless experience with Kindle eBooks from Amazon or eBook downloads from their local public library."**

Data presented in the 2012 article confirmed our suspicions. Over the course of one academic year, the potential savings for the library, based on the number of books accessed but not triggered for purchase, was $12,741.56 (Dinkins, 250). We continue to build demand-driven eBook collections in this way, and our eBook collection has grown to more than 260,000 titles. Due to aggressive collection evaluation and weeding efforts, we now offer 87,000 more monograph titles in electronic format than in print format.

COVID-19 Pandemic

I do not think an article on eBook collections can be written in 2021 without interrogating how well the collections served library users during COVID-19. Although COVID-19 is still impacting operations for academic libraries and may continue to do so for quite some time, we now have roughly a year's worth of data on eBook usage and anecdotal data on the effectiveness of our eBook collections during the pandemic.

In a recent article in the journal *Computers in Libraries*, librarians at Delaware County Community College (DCCC) assessed their eBook usage during a 10-month period between March and December 2020. They tracked usage for all of their eBook collections, which included Ebook Central, Gale eBooks, EBSCO eBooks in a patron-driven acquisition (PDA) collection, and eBooks in their O'Reilly for Higher Education collection (LaMagna, 16). In March 2020, when most campuses rapidly moved to online offerings, DCCC saw a decrease in usage for their eBook collections compared to the same month in 2019. As students and faculty reoriented to online learning throughout the Spring 2020 term, Ebook Central usage increased. In Fall 2020, Ebook Central usage at DCCC doubled from fall 2019 usage (LaMagna, 19).

In an article from the February 2021 issue of *Against the Grain*, librarians from Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) reported on their usage statistics for eBooks and ejournals.

CWRU librarians discovered a "1% increase in overall unique items accessed for both e-journals and eBooks, with a 25% increase in unique eBook titles accessed despite the 56% decrease in Counter-reported usage" (Stuart, 40). They also tracked turnaway count for the two years and found the data showed little change. We had a similar experience at Stetson University, with no significant difference in the number of turnaways for our Ebook Central collection between 2019 and 2020. The number of turnaways for our Ebook Central collections has been low historically, and I believe the reason is two-fold: we only catalog the titles that are available for use, and we turn on short-term loan options for titles when available.

My own library's usage of Ebook Central (our collection includes purchased titles, the Academic subscription, and a DDA collection), was equal or higher in 2020 than for the same months in 2019 (see Figure 1). The only exception was the month of October, and I believe this was due to the shifted semester time frame (beginning in early August and ending before Thanksgiving).

Total Title Investigations by Month 2019 vs 2020
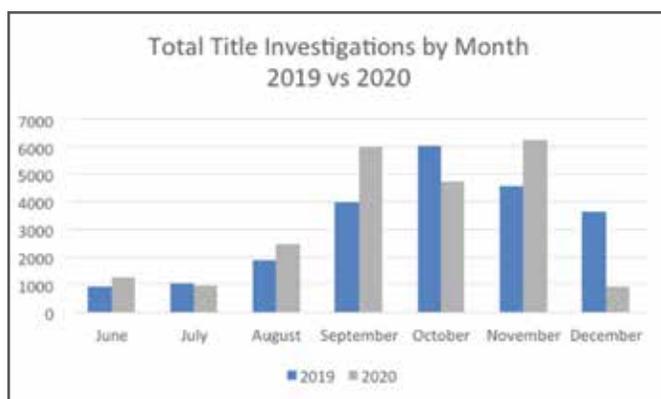
What these studies and my own experience with eBook usage during 2020 tells me is that usage did not drop, except at the very beginning of the lockdown period of the pandemic (March 2020). eBook usage quickly recovered and, in some cases, exceeded usage from 2019. eBook usage during any given semester has always followed a bell curve, in that usage begins to peak in the middle of the semester and slowly decreases until the end of the semester. Even though my university and many others changed the timeline of the semester, eBook usage still followed a similar pattern. My library chose to buy more titles in eBook format during 2020 because both faculty and students were working remotely. Having more choice of eBook titles also contributed to higher usage for us.

Future of eBooks for Academic Libraries

As I enter the last decade of my academic library career at Stetson University, I look forward to encouraging publishers and vendors to develop new access models and payment options for eBook collections. I think the first priority should be enhancing the usability of eBooks offered by academic libraries. In my opinion, the main attraction of eBooks in academic libraries has always been the ability to search through the text. Undergraduates do not have to read the entire book to find the information they need for papers and research. This was a major enhancement for undergraduate students. However, our students sometimes still tell me that they want an eBook they can hold in their hands — they do not mind that it is an eBook, but they want to access it on a mobile device for easy reading.

As of this writing, Ebook Central requires a user to load Adobe Digital Editions (ADE) in order to fully download an eBook. The eBook is then readable and browsable in the ADE interface. This works well for users after their initial ADE download experience, but the first time they try to download an eBook can be a complicated experience. EBSCO eBooks are downloaded in a similar fashion, with ADE. Recently, EBSCO has streamlined the eBook downloading and reading experience with an app for mobile devices, which does not require ADE.

Smaller vendors and publishers offer other options for download to a computer or mobile device with varying difficulty. Our users are used to a seamless experience with Kindle eBooks from Amazon or eBook downloads from their local public library. eBook providers of academic content need to streamline and align their delivery in some way, perhaps even agreeing on an academic library industry standard for eBook delivery. Having to explain multiple platforms and why those platforms work differently and, in some cases, more restrictively, to college students is frustrating for librarians and confusing for the students. Faculty do not understand the differences either. I think EBSCO is moving in the right direction with their mobile app. I wish other eBook vendors and publishers would follow EBSCO's lead.

Pricing for eBooks varies across vendors and publishers. Typically, when an academic library buys an eBook, the price is list price (usually for one concurrent user) or list price plus a percentage (for multiple concurrent users). A small university like mine tends to look for eBook collections that offer a lower price-per-title option, either through a subscription collection or with demand-driven acquisition. Demand-driven collections, with a pay-as-you-go payment plan, also fit our budget and our users' expectations well. In the last few years, I have been intrigued by evidence-based acquisition (EBA) purchase options for eBooks, but my library has not tried one of these options yet. The library budget is almost fully encumbered on day one of our fiscal year; it is a rare occurrence when we have funds available for a deposit account of the size required for EBA purchase models. Providers such as JSTOR, Sage, Cambridge University Press, and the American Chemical Society all offer EBA purchase models. Even GOBI offers EBA and DDA models for acquiring eBooks. Even though libraries must initially invest to use the EBA model, this model allows the library to control the eBook budget more effectively. More flexible budgeting for EBA models, either by paying in installments over the year or with discounted pricing, could help small academic libraries with limited budgets.

Finally, the recent pandemic forced many academic libraries to seek out new ways of delivering course reserve content electronically. Controlled digital lending was a revelation and a life-saver for my library. Controlled digital lending is defined and illustrated by the following:

> Properly implemented, CDL enables a library to circulate a digitized title in place of a physical one in a controlled manner. Under this approach, a library may only loan simultaneously the number of copies that it has legitimately acquired, usually through purchase or donation. For example, if a library owns three copies of a title and digitizes one copy, it may use CDL to circulate one digital copy and two print, or three digital copies, or two digital copies and one print; in all cases, it could only circulate the same number of copies that it owned before digitization. Essentially, CDL must maintain an "owned to loaned" ratio. Circulation in any format is controlled so that only one user can use any given copy at a time, for a limited time. (*controlleddigitallending.org*)

The Internet Archive has taken the idea of controlled digital lending and maximized its potential by offering lending through their *Open Library*. According to the Internet Archive Blog, the *Open Library* contains more than 1.5 million digitized books. Because the Internet Archive has at least one physical copy of the book, most of their digital copies can be borrowed through their site for one hour. If the Internet Archive owns more than one print copy, the title can be checked out for two weeks. Anyone with an email address and an internet connection can access digital copies of print books through *Open Library* (Freeland).

The Internet Archive helped my library with our course reserves during the 2020/2021 academic year. The majority of our students were living away from campus and taking their courses virtually. Our faculty, for the most part, were also off-campus. Before the pandemic, most of our faculty had resisted eBooks for their courses. In some cases, I understood their reluctance. Because of our small budget, we rarely buy eBook access for multiple users. This is a problem for an eBook being used for a course. Many faculty members who tried using single-user eBooks for course reserves found it frustrating for their students, and some faculty found alternative methods for providing the information, such as downloading chapters and posting them to their course site. Some faculty simply insisted the library order print books for course reserves purposes. When the pandemic hit, we were able to find many of our course reserves books in the Internet Archive and provided access that way. The access was a bit more limited than even single-user access, but at least the students could access the content without the library having to purchase the content in additional formats.

I am in full support of the idea of controlled digital lending, especially when the digitizing and the management of lending is centralized with the Internet Archive or another similar nonprofit organization. Small libraries and their users can only benefit from this type of access to digital content. As one would expect, authors and publishers are against controlled digital lending. Four major commercial publishers filed a copyright infringement lawsuit in June 2020, and it is making its way through the courts (Sabaghian).

Conclusion

My simplest conclusion to this article is to recommend that eBook publishers, aggregators, and vendors work together with academic librarians to develop an industry standard of delivery and functionality for eBooks. The industry standards can be complicated and have many different levels of acquisition, but the main idea is to standardize the user experience. In my library, the most common frustration for my library users, both students and faculty, is with eBooks. If we could work toward a standardized download experience across platforms, it would be an important first step. As we see from eBook usage during COVID-19, library users like using eBooks for research. In my opinion, the time has come to give academic library users an easier user experience.

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