IAP Etextbooks embedded in modules – student usage, feedback and engagement PART 1

This blog post was written by Errol Rivera, Edinburgh Napier University.

Everything that happens in an educational environment should be for the students, and e-textbook publishing is no different. Whether you're a university team looking to provide your students with a more affordable or personalised experience, a lecturer looking to forge their own path in academic writing, or simply a module leader who rightly feels like you could write the best textbook for your own module, you're ultimately thinking about your students – at least I hope you are. In education, innovations based in research are well equipped to stand under scrutiny, and make it easier for us as educators to hold our decision making and implementation to account. The challenge is producing data that serves several masters. You want your research to inform your innovation as well as justify it. It also needs to show that word that many hard working academics can find contemptible in the messily qualified world of day-to-day teaching: Success.

If you're adopting an Institution as Publisher (IAP) model for producing your own etextbook, this becomes a unique challenge. This practice is new and under-researched, making it easy for us to ask questions that might seem reasonable, but may not lead to the most useful or clearly meaningful data. As evaluator on an IAP project, we used academic research to support the embedding of IAP texts into modules, and the embedding of an IAP model into normal university operations. The following is a brief of how we developed and executed this research, as well as what's come of it so far:

Making no assumptions: This is a given in research, but it's worth saying here. The IAP etextbook is a new concept, which means we took plenty of time to discuss the kinds of questions we wanted to ask, and why we were asking them.

Avoiding bias: We saw a lot of potential for IAP etextbooks. Cheaper for students. More money directly to lecturers who wrote them. Textbooks fully tailored for a single lecturers designed learning journey. I was constantly looking for questions that were some version of "tell us why this idea is so good?" or "what are you scared of?" and after some hard interrogation, I found more than a few questions that I had to re-write.

What are we trying to do and who's this for?: We knew that we needed to learn whether or not there was a place for an IAP model of producing etextbooks, but we also wanted to inform how that was done. We also wanted to make sure about all of our definitions for success, so that we could decide how to measure it. Those definitions were chosen by looking at the stakeholders.

- The IAP team: A cheap, easily accessible text, that has the quality of a mainstream produced textbook. One that takes advantage of the "e" in etextbook, and could be produced sustainably. The IAP team at The University of the Highlands and Islands wasn't just interested in making one book for one class, and this had a broad influence on our questions. Their full focus was on a well-developed process that wouldn't run the danger of, say, working better for one disciplinary culture than another. To fit this philosophy, they decided to make an etextbook that could be used in any number of disciplines: research projects and dissertation writing. Our surveys had to be flexible in terms of subject discipline, sample size, and type of university. This is also important to note, because we didn't spend a lot of time

thinking about subject-centred questions. For that expertise, you'll want to consult the other Jisc funded IAP teams.

- The Student: a cheap text that's easy to get and easy to understand, and relevant to what they're learning.
- University leadership: an IAP process that is financially sustainable, easy to manage, with a positive effect on the student experience, as well as the reputation of the university.
- Our funders: Jisc was good enough to give us a list of things they wanted to learn about, all of which added up to all-the-above, and much much more. Ultimately, our understanding is that they wanted a knowledge base for forming IAP models, one that lecturers and universities alike could participate in and benefit from, as well as understanding the economic influences that might occur from a shift in the landscape of higher education publishing. They also wanted to know how much students were already using etextbooks and whether that had a meaningful difference on how they experienced higher education.

As mentioned before, your data should inform the design of your IAP model. So, we asked a lot of questions about price, quality, where students get books, on what devices and platforms do they read etextbooks. We also asked what makes them get books that are only recommended as opposed to required. There were more than a few questions not just about etextbooks but texts in general. This started to feel like market research, and this is where the "who's this for?" question really kept us in line – that and good old fashioned research ethics.

We weren't the authors and producers of the etextbook, but we worked with the people who did and we support them. We were also responsible for getting lecturers to volunteer for this project – that meant, welcoming the UHI IAP etextbook onto their reading lists, as such we were constantly policing ourselves to make sure we weren't acting like salesmen. If I learned anything in this process, it's that when you're trying to introduce an innovation you care about (especially one that makes money), the ethical rigors of academic research aren't just helpful – they're necessary. That doesn't mean you can't collect data from students who pay for the product/process you're researching, but there should always be a free option. As such we created a two-stage survey collection – one survey about textbooks and etextbooks in general, and one about the etextbooks in question which they could acquire for free after finishing the first survey.

What we learned was that students, more than anything, prioritise usefulness. They put a lot of trust in their lecturers, to guide them in finding texts. We were also happy to learn that a majority of our respondents made good use of the university library for their texts. However, out with the library and required reading lists, low prices can actually give students second thoughts about the prospective quality of textbooks – so, IAP teams have to do different things to ensure students that their etextbook is worth it. This can encompass everything from search engine optimisation, to recommendations from prominent academics and award winning students, or even just engaging with individual lecturers who could benefit. We also learned that lecturers consistently want their books available in libraries, which provides licensing challenges for IAP teams. Finally, we learned that the IAP concept presented lecturers with exciting professional development possibilities for their own writing and academic careers.

This is just a quick look at the kinds of questions and data that could be used to justify an IAP pilot, but what about when you get them in the classroom? For that, you'll have to read part two of IAP Etextbooks embedded in modules – student usage, feedback and engagement.

In the meantime, feel free to have a look at [our stage-one survey](), and interrogate it for your own usage. This annotated PDF will detail question structure and explain a bit of the thinking behind specific questions.