Feedback from an author: an academic's experience

This blog post was written by Professor Frank Rennie*, Lews Castle College, University of the Highlands and Islands.

The principle benefits that I have realised from participating in the e-tips project to explore the e-text publication of the scholarly output for a university are, the speed of publication to the global readership, and the added value that can be obtained by repurposing in a different format work which is already substantially completed.

In evaluating e-text publication, I think it is red herring to dwell upon the length of time required to produce the initial manuscript. As with a conventional hard-copy book, the time taken to complete the manuscript for e-publication can vary from a single week of authorship over-drive, to the patient aggregation of many years of painstaking working and re-working. The crucial consideration is that, like any good book, the text needs to be well-written and the subject needs to be worth reading. After completing the manuscript, I was pleasantly surprised how easy the process was to release the text for worldwide publication. After the proof-reading and the confirmation of the final draft, the actual formatting was completed in an afternoon, and the e-textbook was available online within 24 hours. As this was an experimental project, most of the team were closely involved with every aspect of the publication process, and while this can be fulfilling for an author, it can also lead to over-complication of decision-making, and the slowing down of production. I was certainly more closely involved with each stage than with any previous 'conventional' book publication. A recommendation for the future is that while there may be opportunities to involve the author(s) in various aspects of the publication process, these opportunities should be subsidiary to a strong central decision-making and time-tabling.

In the case of the e-textbooks produced by this project, there was no expectation of any royalties accruing to the authors, but this might be a consideration for future publications. It could be envisaged that different royalties agreements might be made on a sliding scale for different types of e-publication. In the case of re-purposing work for a module textbook, the main writing might be completed as part of a normal academic workload, with a quickly turned-around product for students and professional recognition of the author being the only rewards. At the other end, of the scale, a flagship e-textbook or the collected proceedings of a conference, could produce a financial incentive for the author or be designated to an appropriate charity.

The main reward for an author, as with some many other 'conventional' books, is for the author to see their name in print and have a feeling of satisfaction that their work is being read and appreciated. A key benefit for the institution is that the authors are recognised as being scholars/academics of a particular university, and that both the university and the authors gain an enhanced visibility on the global stage.

Having participated in this project, both as a lead author and as part of an editorial team, I can see many other opportunities for me to disseminate my work in e-publication format. This includes short texts/extended-essays which have been prepared for specific academic modules, or the aggregation of blog posts curated over a prolonged time on a particular theme. The advantage to me of the e-

publication format is that it enables the global dissemination of my ideas to what might be a fairly specific minority-interest readership. It also useful for fast-moving areas of education/research where the half-life of useful knowledge is likely to change quickly. An advantage to the university is that it is a relatively low-risk means of making the scholarly products of the institution highly visible to a potentially large but anonymous readership. The success of academic e-publishing will be determined by reputational quality, of the institution and of the academic, but it is a meritocracy to which I will happily contribute.

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