

## **Educational Potential of eBook Technology**

### **Abstract**

The presenter will discuss and demonstrate the current state of eBook technology. More importantly, he will share experiences with using eBook technology within the framework of existing college courses. Characteristics of this new technology, both positive and negative, in relationship to accessibility and effectiveness will be presented. Implications for educators, such as content access and intellectual property concerns, will be discussed.

### **Proposal**

The World Wide Web has emerged as a powerful force for education. Courses and expertise can be accessed outside of the traditional bounds of a school or university. In the classroom, the web provides a seemingly endless source of information and resources. Although the Internet is increasingly becoming a delivery system for multimedia, educators continue to rely on it to deliver text-based materials.

Unfortunately, the web lacks the portability of the most traditional educational medium, the book. A popular solution is to envision students equipped with laptop computers and Internet access provided by wireless and/or wired additions to a school's network. Unfortunately, this is an expensive solution, especially when the student can acquire a more powerful, cheaper desktop system (albeit a less portable one).

In the meantime, students and faculty achieve portability by printing copies of needed web content and assignments (a wasteful, inefficient use of resources). Outside of the computer classroom and away from a home system, the student is no more "connected" or "empowered" than a previous generation carrying a similar load of textbooks and papers around campus.

An emerging, potential solution is the development of handheld electronic books (or eBooks). The term "ebook" is often used to describe portable reading devices and the content they contain. Current models are somewhat bigger and slightly heavier than their paperback counterparts. Connectivity with a computer and/or the Internet provides a ready source of material. In addition to electronic versions of traditional books, existing web pages can be downloaded and read by these devices.

Many eBooks have accompanying software that allows the presentation of the same material on any desktop or laptop system. The price of some eBook hardware has dropped dramatically over the past few years and is likely to continue to decrease as the devices become more common. One current model, which sells for just under \$300, can hold 55,000 pages of text and at least 20 hours of battery use without recharging. It is likely that the use and availability of

eBooks will increase dramatically, regardless of their application (or not) in education.

Unfortunately, the book and electronic media have often been portrayed as competitors for the hearts and minds of students. Traditionally, books and literacy have been closely associated with education. Electronic media are a vast wasteland and contribute to the shortening of attention spans. Consuming technology requires isolating yourself in front of a television screen or computer monitor. On the other hand, young turks promote the new media as providing richer, alternative representations of knowledge. Dusty books contain outdated information; in the information age only the uninformed have to resort to RTFM ("reading the manual").

The integration of these apparently divergent viewpoints can be realized through the proper use of eBooks. Although a traditionalist will likely bemoan the loss of a certain tactile pleasure in the reading of an electronic version of a book, it is hard to argue that a portable, virtual library of readings in the students' hands (whether in the classroom, on a bus, or under a convenient shady tree) does not enable the depth of learning formerly confined to a library or well-stocked study. Electronic books do not provide the high-tech frills associated with current desktop and laptop systems. However, the lower cost and increased portability extend the reach of available content. This economy and accessibility are important concerns for the equitable use of technology in education.

Presumably, they are more environmentally friendly than the laser-printing alternative. It has also been estimated that at least 50% of the books printed by current publishers are destroyed after failing to sell (hopefully, a significant number are recycled and not totally wasted).

The presenter will discuss and demonstrate the current state of eBook technology. More importantly, he will share experiences with using eBook technology in existing college courses. Characteristics of this new technology, both positive and negative, in relationship to accessibility and effectiveness will be presented. Implications for educators, such as content access and intellectual property concerns, will be discussed.