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E-books: the future?

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E-Books

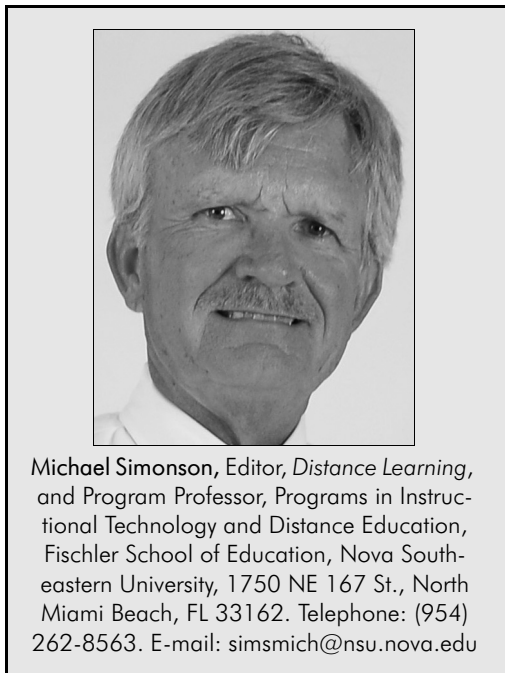
The Future?

Michael Simonson

"We will no longer publish printed books in the field of education, we will only publish e-books."
—Statement heard in the executive offices of a large international publisher.

"A house without books is like a room without windows."
—Horace Mann

"Many people, myself among them, feel better at the mere sight of a book."
—Jane Smiley



What is trending in distance education? E-books!

E-books are being proclaimed by some as the next major consequence of the digital revolution. These "futurists" forecast that the printed book is destined to go the way of Super-8 film, VHS tapes, and floppy disks.

E-books, simply defined as electronic versions of printed books, offer the reader many advantages. Certainly, the electronic book, newspaper, journal, even comic book are here to stay. There are many obviously advantages of electronic publishing. Pastore (2010) listed the major advantages of e-books. Some of his more interesting claims are:

- E-books promote reading. People are spending more time in front of screens and less time in front of printed books.

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- E-books are faster and cheaper to produce than paper books, and are often cheaper to buy.
- E-books are easily updateable.
- E-books are searchable.
- E-books are portable. The reader can carry an entire library.
- E-books defy time: they can be delivered almost instantly.
- E-books can be annotated without harming the original work.
- E-books make reading accessible to persons with disabilities. Text can be resized for the visually impaired. Screens can be lit for reading in the dark.
- E-books can be hyperlinked for easier access to additional information.
- E-books can read aloud to you.
- E-books defeat attempts at censorship.

So, educators generally, and distance educators specifically, are now faced with a decision—the e-book or the printed book? And, if a favorite text is only available electronically or only in print form, should this influence the adoption decision? Interestingly, some publishers indicate they will make the choice for us—the electronic text will be the only option.

Is this an important issue? When one thinks about either/or decisions distance educators make, the medium used for the delivery of the printed word does not seem to rise to the level of some other controversial decisions, such choosing between virtual vs. brick and mortar schools, or the issue of open vs. proprietary CMSs.

But, perhaps this apparently simple issue—offering books in *only* an electronic format, a decision being made by several large publishers—is an issue that may have greater implications than one might

expect. Certainly, the advantages of e-books listed by Pastore are important, but why are some in our field left a little cold by the decision by publishers to only publish textbooks in an electronic format? What is lost compared to what is gained? Most teachers think textbook selection is an academic issue, as is the decision about content delivery, and that access to accurate information in books is fundamental.

Journal and book editors know that “content is king,” and that journal articles and books are created by knowledgeable authors *who can write*. The control of content, which is routinely signed away by authors when they agree to have their ideas, scholarship, and creativity published, actually means that content is controlled by publishers. This is not news. Copyright release forms are a part of the publishing process.

But, books have always been relatively immune from exclusive ownership. When we buy a book it belongs to us. Public libraries have long offered near universal access, and our ever-diligent librarians and media specialists have long guaranteed access, often to the consternation of publishers.

Is there a problem if the contents of books are continuously controlled by publishers, with access made available, if at all, only for money? Hmm Somehow this seems wrong.

Distance Learning would like to publish articles dealing with the issue of e-books and their impact on teaching and learning.

And finally, as Thomas Jefferson said, “I cannot live without books.”

REFERENCE

Pastore, M. (2010). *50 benefits of ebooks*. Ithaca, NY: Zorba.