Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Faculty in the Applied and Pure Sciences May Have Limited Experience with E-books
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Jennifer Kaari

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:
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Reviewed by:
Jennifer Kaari
Librarian
East Orange Public Library
East Orange, New Jersey, United States of America
Email: jkaari@eopl.org

Abstract

Objective – To determine the usage of and attitudes toward e-books among faculty in the applied and pure sciences.

Design – Online survey and in-person interviews.

Setting – A large public university in the United States.

Subjects – 11 faculty members.

Methods – Participants completed an 11-item survey covering demographic data and questions about electronic book experience and preferences. This was followed up by an in-person interview with the researchers. The interviews were structured into three sections: opening questions about e-book usage, an interactive demonstration and discussion of two preselected e-books, and final follow-up questions. Interviews followed a general script of prepared questions, but also encouraged open discussion and dialogue.

Main Results – Most participants in the study reported limited experience with e-books and only 3 of the 11 participants reported using library-purchased e-books in their research and instruction. Participants noted ease of access and searchability as key advantages of e-books. Concerns included the belief that reading and learning is more difficult on a desktop computer, as well as concerns about

the stability and reliability of e-book access. Participants also felt negatively about the necessity to create a new login profile and password to access e-books. The study found no difference in the way faculty in pure and applied sciences approached e-books.

Conclusion – The authors determine that e-books will likely become more commonly used in academia. Users want e-books that are easy to use and customizable. In addition, the authors conclude that librarians need to understand their patrons' needs as e-book users and proactively promote and market their e-book collections.

Commentary

This paper begins with the question of whether e-books have reached the tipping point. Nearly a decade after its original publication, e-books are well past that tipping point, but many of the questions being addressed in this paper remain relevant to academic librarians to this day. As illustrated in more recent reviews and studies on the topic, lack of awareness of e-books, issues about usability, and questions about e-book marketing and promotion in libraries remain open concerns (Blummer & Kenton, 2018; Carroll, 2016).

Based on Glynn's critical appraisal tool for library and information science, this study had a 77% validity (2006). The methodology is well-described and the authors include the full survey instrument as well as the questions used for the in-person interviews. The description of the results is robust. However, the study's validity suffers from the lack of a clearly outlined research question and the conclusions are very general and are not well-linked to the results of the study itself. The authors note that their selection of participants was unscientific. This and the small number of participants represent limitations to the study and make the findings themselves not generalizable to other populations.

This paper highlights the value of utilizing multiple methodologies when tackling complex questions about user behavior and awareness. The authors note that by following up the online survey with in-depth interviews, they were able to discover discrepancies between the findings of the survey and the interviews, notably, that participants who claimed on the survey to have no experience with e-book usage did report experience when interviewed directly. Incorporating a demonstration into the interview process also yielded interesting findings regarding users' perspectives on specific features and functions that might not have been elicited from survey or simple interview questions, particularly given many of the participants' relative lack of experience with e-book interfaces.

Despite its limitations, this paper has value for researchers and librarians who are interested in exploring how faculty attitudes toward and usage of e-books have or have not changed over time. In particular, it would be interesting to examine if some of the hesitations faculty held about e-book usage have been addressed by technological advances. The authors also note that while their study did not provide any evidence in differences between the pure and applied sciences in e-book utilization, it would be worth re-examining the possibility for differences between the fields now that e-book usage has become more commonplace.

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