



## Going Paperless: Is This Generation Ready?

Most instructors would agree that it's important for students, in order for them to keep up with course content, to have access to required resources (e.g., textbooks) during the first week or two of the semester. After all, that is why we deem these resources "required" instead of "suggested." Yet, many students may be left without access to required course resources during the first few weeks due to a number of factors. Perhaps they require a longer period to adjust to a school-work-life balance; or perhaps they have financial limitations that make it difficult to acquire these resources (e.g., government funding delays, personal financial priorities); or, the reason may be something else entirely, such as not being aware that there is a required textbook for the course. For textbooks to be the most valuable resource for students (and perceived as valuable by students), students should have access to them at the beginning of the course.

But what form should access to these resources take? Past experience suggests that students are reluctant to access these resources even when they're made available free of charge through the library reserve desk. For example, although every year there are nearly 1,000 students registered for an introductory psychology course that fulfills a general education requirement, the textbook placed on reserve at the library is only accessed approximately 25 times. (This could mean 25 students each accessing it once; five students accessing it five times each; one student alone accessing it 25 times; or a multitude of other combinations adding up to 25.) There are always several students per course who admit to not having the textbook in any format. Taken together, these non-empirical approximations suggest that there are likely many students who do not have access to course textbooks, especially considering the student survey data discussed below.

Electronic textbooks (e-texts) are less expensive than traditional printed copies, and students entering postsecondary appear to be comfortable with technology, which begs the question, "Are e-texts the way to go?" In another Ontario college, students are given access to all of their course textbooks in e-text format for half the cost, which is rolled into their student/tuition fees (see <http://www.algonquincollege.com/etexts/texidium-faq/#initiative>). E-texts may be able to address the issues mentioned above (i.e., time-management, financial challenges, not knowing there is a required text), but do students actually prefer e-texts?

In this pilot study, some students were provided access to a free electronic version of their course textbook and invited to participate in a survey to learn about their experiences. Two sections of a computers course (hybrid-delivery) and two sections of a psychology course (online-delivery) received e-texts from Pearson to use on the Texidium platform, on which students can access their digital textbooks and resources. The remaining sections of the same two courses offered the same delivery format and taught by the same instructor served as the control group: two computer courses and one psychology course. Near the end of the 12-week semester, students in all of these courses were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey designed to gather information about their perception and experiences with textbooks in general.

### Survey Results

Because only 20 students elected to participate in this small-scale pilot (13 experimental and 7 control), it is difficult to draw global conclusions. However, trends in the responses do give us a glimpse into the learning philosophy of this cohort of students. Below are the general points that emerged from the survey data:

- Students have a slight preference for printed textbooks. Notably, this self-reported preference did not drop dramatically even when students were told the e-text was half the cost of the printed textbook. That is, it appears cost is not the main driving factor in students' textbook format preference, or in the way they choose to access these resources.
- Of the respondents, 75 percent reported that it is not important to have all of the required textbooks on the first day of class, and only 57 percent reported that they actually acquire all of the required resources for courses. Of the required textbooks to which students had access, only one-third were actually purchased. The remaining two-thirds of students indicated that they acquired course resources from other sources: friends (66 percent), internet (66 percent), and/or the library (33 percent). This may reflect students' lack of perceived usefulness of textbooks. (50 percent of students indicated that textbooks had very little effect on their learning, which is a stark contrast to instructors' perceptions of textbooks as necessary resources for students to succeed in the course.)

- Almost half of the students experienced some sort of technical difficulties, which may be another reason for the preference for printed texts. However, students did not report dissatisfaction with the Texidium e-text platform. So, technical issues did not appear to be detrimental to e-text usage and enjoyment.
- Students who received the e-text reported that this did not increase their learning in the course or their reading of the textbook. Most students indicated that they perceived learning and reading about the same amount with the e-text. In some cases, students reported even less learning and reading than with a traditional textbook.
- E-text users mostly reported a shallow engagement with the resource. For example, 54 percent of students used the highlighting feature in the e-text, and 31 percent also took advantage of the notetaking feature, which may have allowed them to engage with the material at a deeper level. (According to the cognitive science literature, engaging with course materials at a deeper level should increase learning and retention.)
- In terms of class performance, the e-text students did outperform the students in the control group. Specifically, e-text students' final grades were about seven percent higher. However, we must use caution when looking at these data. Given the small sample size, this difference was not significant, but it is interesting to note that it was in the expected direction: students who had access to the required resource (e-text) from the beginning of the semester outperformed those who did not. Although we cannot say whether they used the text more, and their self-reported data do not suggest such, it is possible that they did use it more without it affecting how much they perceived using it.
- Students in the e-text condition were also presented with a hypothetical scenario where students could be given access to all of their course textbooks in e-text format for one-half the cost of the print versions, and this cost would be rolled into their student/tuition fees. This proposed hypothetical scenario actually already exists elsewhere (see <http://www.algonquincollege.com/etexts/texidium-faq/#initiative>). In line with this proposal, we asked students whether they liked such an option: 54 percent were in favor of this hypothetical initiative, while 46 percent were against it. This divide further supports students' preference for print over e-texts, even if the financial benefits of using e-texts may be greater.
- The course instructors were also surveyed and their preferences for printed textbooks were

clear, although they also recognized the value in providing students with e-texts as an option, especially if it would allow students to obtain the required course resources earlier in the semester. Additionally, their perception was that students don't always purchase (or have access to) the required materials, which was somewhat supported in the student data described above.

### Concluding Remarks

Although students entering postsecondary classrooms may be quite familiar with technology and have access to it at their fingertips, this small-scale survey suggests that their familiarity with and access to technology doesn't mean that they necessarily want e-texts in their courses, or that e-texts would be a beneficial resource for all students. Yet, the reported survey responses from students and faculty may also point to another issue, which is that all students, for a variety of reasons, may not have access to required course resources. This issue may be systemic, and could benefit from further empirical investigation, along with the question of whether providing students automatic access to e-texts, as is currently done at Algonquin College, could solve this issue.

*What are your thoughts about students' readiness to go paperless? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)*

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