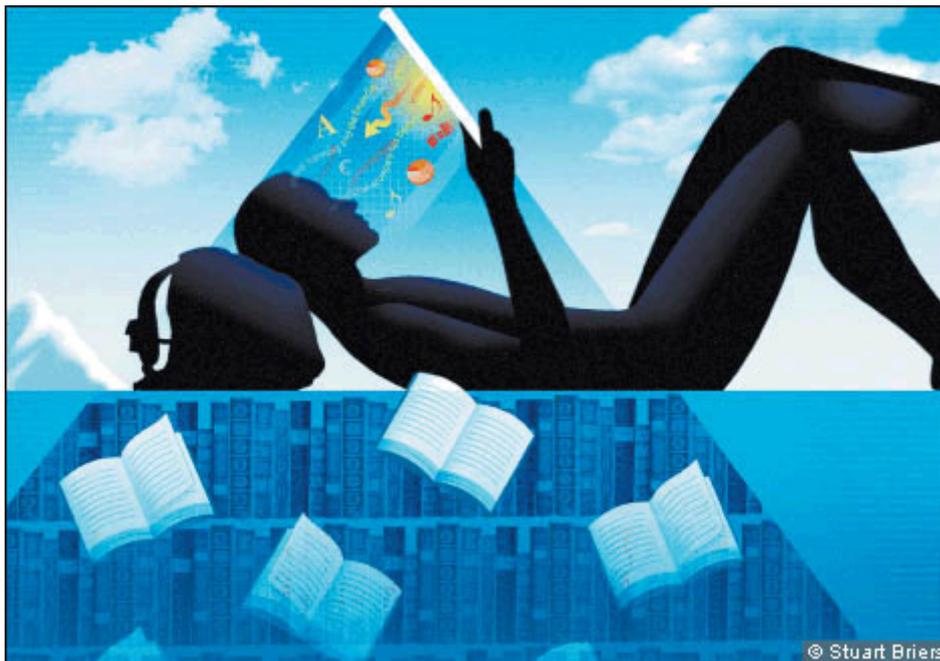


Universities adopt Kindle

Paul Taylor and Della Bradshaw



When Jeff Bezos, Amazon's chief executive, announced the large screen Kindle DX e-book reader earlier this year, he chose Pace University in New York City as the launch venue.

The choice was no accident. Pace is one of six US colleges that are participating in a pilot programme to test the Kindle DX, the latest in a steady stream of technology gizmos that are finding their way into the classroom and lecture hall.

Seattle-based Amazon, best known as an online book seller, is providing several hundred discounted Kindle DX readers to Arizona State University, Case Western Reserve University, Princeton University, Reed College, and Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia as part of the pilot scheme. The colleges in turn are making them available to students free of charge.

The US colleges participating in the scheme believe the Kindle DX's large display could make it a viable alternative to course textbooks – particularly those complex images, tables, charts, graphs, and equations.

As part of the launch, Amazon signed deals with three leading textbook publishers Cengage Learning, Pearson (owner of the Financial Times) and Wiley which together represent more than 60 per cent of the US higher education textbook market.

"We believe e-book technology has significant potential to influence the way students approach learning," said Barbara Snyder, president of Case Western Reserve University at the Kindle DX launch. " We look forward to seeing precisely how our students take advantage of it."

Case Western hopes the pilot will answer questions about whether the process of education will change as a result of the new technology, whether the devices will enable faculty to deliver information in new ways and whether students will approach their readings and assignments differently.

At the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, dean Robert Bruner believes the scheme will help Darden test the limits of digital distribution.

The Darden MBA class has five sections with 62 students in each. One of the five sections was given the Kindle in August in what Prof Bruner describes as a controlled experiment.

It is not compulsory for those within the Kindle section to use the technology and those in other sections are allowed to buy the reader themselves if they so choose.

Unlike the undergraduate colleges in the Kindle DX scheme which are mainly using the devices as a replacement for standard textbooks, Darden is using the device for case studies, one of the traditional teaching tools of all the top business schools.

Darden is the second largest producer of case studies in the world – after Harvard Business School. If Darden can get this right, there are huge business opportunities for it to sell its case studies through Amazon in the same way that management books and audio lectures are sold.

“I really want us to step out in front in the mastery of digital distribution,” says Prof Bruner.

In the Darden experiment, case studies are distributed as PDFs for viewing on the Kindle, which supports the PDF format as well as Amazon’s proprietary book format.

Typically Darden students get 600 cases to read during their two years at college – three to four stacks of material. So Darden’s senior administrators, like their counterparts elsewhere, believe the Kindle DX (and potentially other e-readers) could have a positive environmental impact and reduce the strain on students’ backs and bank balances. Indeed, one of the biggest attractions of electronic texts is their lower cost. US college students spent an average of \$702 each on course materials during the 2006-07 academic year according to Ohio-based National Association of College Stores’ Student Watch 2008 report.

Some of the current eTextbook offerings, like CourseSmart, already give students the option to download eTextbooks for a considerable discount. But these texts are generally only available as 180 day subscriptions. Kindle ebooks generally sell at a significant discount (about 50 per cent) to traditional printed copies, and with many printed textbooks costing \$100 or more, the savings to students could be substantial.

Aside from the potential monetary savings, business education experts at Duke Corporate Education argue that devices like the Kindle, smartphones and lecture room polling devices provide ways to involve and interact with students brought up on a diet of video games, YouTube and Facebook.

It is not, they argue, that traditional teaching methods have failed, rather that technology provides new ways to deliver rich content to students in much the same way that the printing press made it much easier to distribute information.

New devices like the Kindle DX provide an opportunity for educators, but do not guarantee success and much still depends on the quality of the content. “The most important thing about the new Kindle is its existence in an ecosystem that Amazon is creating,” said Adrian Sannier, technology officer at Arizona State University, another of the universities launching pilot programmes. “It’s all the elements coming together that makes this attempt so different.”

But, even ardent Kindle DX supporters acknowledge that e-readers may not be best for everyone. For example, Darden is one of the big executive short course providers in the US, but does not have any plans to use the Kindle for these kind of management classes. “Forty-year olds have a desire for relationship mastery; 28-year olds have a desire for technical mastery,” explains Prof Bruner.

“What’s really different about this incoming cohort (of MBA students) is that they are showing the attributes of the multimedia generation,” says Prof Bruner. “They like structured problems; they don’t care for ambiguity; they are more consensual, more trusting of organisations, of businesses. They search for clarity about how to get ahead.”

Case studies are the antithesis to this, he says. “In case studies there are no right answers but there are many wrong ones.”

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