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# E-reader pilot projects at the University of Manchester



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## INTRODUCTION

The John Rylands University Library (JRUL) is one of the largest academic library services in the UK, serving a student body of around 37 000 and a staff of over 11 000 (over 5000 of whom are academic or research staff). JRUL itself has a staff of 300, spread across library sites of varying size and nature. Nine sites are located on campus, whilst our world-renowned holdings of early printed books, manuscripts and archives are housed in a grade 1\* listed building in Manchester city centre.

## E-LEARNING SUPPORT AT THE JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY (JRUL)

In 2009 an e-learning support team was formed within the library's Research and Learning Support division, to help deliver the library's strategic goal to 'enhance the student experience by promoting the use of new technologies in teaching and learning at the university'. The team's remit includes the implementation of the library's new online reading list system (TalisAspire), digitisation under the terms of the CLA Higher Education Scanning licence and the use of new technologies such as e-readers to deliver course readings. A copyright information service is also offered by the team.

## E-READERS

The subject of e-book readers, and particularly the question of their place in academic libraries, has been on the agenda for some time. Over the past 2–3 years there have been several studies into the use of portable reading devices both in UK and US Higher Education institutions. Cranfield University and the Open University collaborated in 2009 to carry out a small pilot project exploring the student experience of using e-book readers.<sup>1</sup> In March 2010 Newcastle University launched a pilot scheme investigating the potential use of e-book readers in the library, making 12 Sony PRS-505 readers available for loan.<sup>2</sup> From July to November 2010 the library at the University of Sheffield evaluated the potential use of e-readers through a trial service, loaning both the Amazon Kindle and Sony Reader, and asking those who took part to complete a feedback survey.<sup>3</sup> Princeton University has investigated the potential uses of the Kindle DX in a classroom setting,<sup>4</sup> and Penn State trialled Sony e-readers with support from the company.<sup>5</sup>

In August 2009 the JRUL acquired a set of Sony e-readers, funded by the university, and the library's newly formed e-learning support team was asked to organise a series of pilot projects to trial their use in an academic environment.

The first set of e-readers the library acquired were Sony PRS-505s. This was an early model that allowed content to be loaded and read in a variety of formats, including PDFs. Other functions offered with this model are bookmarking and the option to upload and listen to audio files, and to load and view images. The library later went on to purchase a further set of e-readers, the Sony PRS-600. This is a touch screen edition that, along with all the functionality of the basic model, allows you to turn pages with the slide of a finger, create annotations on the virtual keyboard and highlight text with the accompanying stylus pen. You can also search for books or words using the virtual keyboard and double-tap a word on-screen to find its meaning in the built-in dictionary.

## THE PILOT PROJECTS

### *School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures*

The impact of hand-held portable reading technologies on traditional text-based subjects within the humanities has begun to be considered by academics. However, to date there has been little analysis of the ways in which these emergent technologies could potentially transform

and change curriculum delivery. On this basis we were approached by Dr Guyda Armstrong (School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures), who was keen to investigate the use of e-readers in the literary studies classroom with students taking her module 'Love poetry for beginners'. Each of the eight students taking the module were loaned a PRS-505 e-reader, which had been pre-loaded with a copy of the set text (scanned with permission from the publisher as it is now out of print) and around twenty digitised book chapters and journal articles from their course reading list. Each of the digitised items was scanned, cropped and converted to PDF format by the library's digitisation team. The same content could also be accessed via the library's online reading list system. The library provided Dr Armstrong's students with an initial training session in the use of the e-readers, and they were then asked to keep a weekly journal of their experiences of using the device, and also to complete online feedback for their course assessment.

Initially the idea of using the e-readers appealed to many of the students:

'The fact that it was very light and compact, not to mention that it had several useful and valuable articles on it, meant that it held certain advantages over a printed book in terms of convenience and logistics. After all it is far easier to have all the books stored as files on the reader than it would be to carry around dozens of books with you wherever you went.'

However, the overall the feedback suggested that, whilst the e-reader was useful both as portable storage device and for referring to texts on a basic level, the hardware was simply not advanced enough to make studying from them practicable, negative comparisons often being made with other widely used devices such as iPhones and MacBooks. The main issues raised were the lack of a touch screen and the speed of navigation. Another drawback was the lack of interactivity the device allows, preventing annotation of texts etc.

All students reported that they had used the digitally scanned copies of their texts provided by the library, via either the e-reader, laptop or a PC, many gaining access to these online via the library's reading list system and all students taking the module responded that they had accessed their set text, Dante's *Vita nuova*, using the e-readers.

Dr Armstrong reported that she felt the use of the e-readers had added great value to her module, not only by having a positive effect on the amount of background reading done by her students, but also in prompting them to think about the effects of the method of delivery on the meaning of the medieval texts studied.

'The use of library eBook readers has transformed my medieval course provision this year, and has animated the course in quite unexpected ways. One clear advantage to their use has been the fact that they have made available my preferred edition of the set text. This book is currently out of print, but the publishers (the Italian department at University College Dublin) generously licensed it for electronic distribution on my course. As well as the set text, the reader also contained other key readings, and the convenience of the device clearly contributed to an improved level of background reading amongst the students relative to previous years. Finally, the fact of accessing these medieval texts in a digital format has forced the whole group to reflect on the ways in which the medium affects the message, and what it might mean for the words from a medieval manuscript to be rendered and delivered electronically.'

#### *School of English and American Studies*

The second pilot took place in semester 2, 2009/10, with Dr Jerome De Groot, lecturer in English and American Studies. Dr De Groot's module 'Milton 1608 – 2.0' aimed to encourage students to use a range of new technologies and software in their learning. Noting the limitations of the Sony PRS-505, the library purchased a set of Sony's new model of e-reader, the Sony PRS-600, seeking to tackle some of the problems reported with the basic model in the initial pilot. The e-readers were again loaded with a selection of scanned book chapters and journal articles from the module reading list. Students were given a training session by library staff, and were asked to create a reflective blog/diary on their experience of using the e-readers as part of their module coursework. The students were also given the opportunity to view and handle manuscripts and early printed editions held within the library's special collections division. The feedback from Dr De Groot's module was again mixed, and there was a general consensus that reading Milton on a modern digital device simply could not replicate reading from a paper copy:

'I did not receive the smooth, fluent reading experience I get from books.'

However, Dr De Groot reported that for the first time he had received no complaints regarding the library's resource provision.

#### *Manchester Business School*

In July 2010, in collaboration with staff at the Eddie Davies Library at Manchester Business School, the team ran a pilot inviting a small number of MBA students to participate in a focus group session to assess if e-readers were a suitable tool for storing and viewing study pack materials, previously provided in print form. The e-book readers were pre-loaded with various documents: digitised chapters and a number of freely available e-books in both PDF and e-pub format. Participants were also encouraged to load the reader themselves with free e-books, electronic journal articles and any other items they found useful. Five students volunteered to test out the e-book readers over a four-week period and were asked to consider and evaluate their usability. The students all liked the concept of the e-book reader and agreed that this particular model was ideal in terms of size and portability. However, they felt it was not an appropriate product for study materials as the screen was too small to view digitised documents and it was not possible to annotate or move easily between documents. Overall the volunteers felt that this particular model of e-reader lends itself to viewing e-books for leisure but not for accessing, downloading or viewing an academic study pack. All agreed that to view study pack materials they would want a larger screen, internet connectivity, multi-tasking functions and interactivity between documents. Members of the group stated that they currently use the electronic reading lists as a mode of accessing materials and were happy for readings to be hosted in this way, as it provides a flexibility for them to decide which medium (e.g. Smartphone, laptops, iPads etc.) to download to. The conclusion drawn from the pilot was that if an e-book reader was to be adopted for the MBA programme it should complement access to study materials rather than be the sole medium for them.

#### *School of Medicine*

From August to December 2010 the team undertook one final pilot, providing the Sony PRS-600s for a Postgraduate Certificate in Medical Education module within the School of Medicine. This course presented a very different kind of student: hospital consultants. They were provided with an e-reader each, pre-loaded with digitised items

and e-journal articles from their reading list, along with their course handbook. It was hoped that this particular project would help both the library, and teaching staff within the School of Medicine, to understand the impact that such course material delivery might have on a group of busy consultants; a group who have in the past reportedly struggled to access information on line, and do not have the time to visit the library regularly.

Of those who provided feedback, 11 out of the 16 participants in this pilot described the functionality of the Sony e-readers as poor. One of the most common reasons cited was the problem surrounding enlarging the text/using the zoom function. Other issues highlighted were the lack of a colour screen, slow response times (particularly in comparison to other heavily-used devices such as Smart phones and tablets) and the lack of sensitivity in the touch screen. However, those who did respond positively found the device user-friendly and easy to use, and liked the ability to transport large volumes of material easily. Interestingly, many of the participants reported still preferring print to electronic delivery of texts. However, those who were comfortable with electronic delivery reported that their preferred medium would be a laptop, PC or Tablet, with the advantages they offer over the current e-reader interface. The general consensus was that whilst they appreciated the motives behind providing all the material on one portable device, the device itself simply did not have the qualities needed to make them usable for study on a regular basis. Many reported that they would have been happy with the same material provided to them on a simple memory stick or CD, where they could then load the material to their own devices, avoiding the need for training/adjusting to yet another new device.

#### **ISSUES/PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED**

The University of Manchester holds a Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) Higher Education Comprehensive Scanning Licence. This sets out the conditions under which we may make digital copies of copyright material published in the UK for inclusion in course intranets and the VLE. The CLA confirmed that we were allowed to make digitally scanned content available to students via the e-readers; however, we were still restricted in what we could digitise from the reading lists under the terms of the licence. We were therefore unable to provide any complete books (with the exception of the core text for Dr Armstrong's course, which was allowed on the basis of a

private agreement between the publisher and Dr Armstrong).

We also encountered some issues with the way in which our scanned PDF files displayed on the screens of the e-readers. The only files we can produce using our in-house scanner are image files, and once loaded onto the readers the text size was relatively small. The text size could be enlarged using the zoom function; however, this created issues with the formatting of the document, and the only other functionality available to resize text was rendered defunct when using image files. The size of the text also caused problems with some of the other functionality of the readers, such as the ability to highlight and the use of the dictionary. However, we did eventually manage to find a work-around for most of these problems.

### CONCLUSION

Technology in the area of mobile devices is progressing rapidly, and as early adopters of such devices we are already suffering the effects; e-readers such as the PRS-505 are becoming obsolete.

However, as the technology develops, so too are the issues raised in our pilots being addressed. The release of devices such as the iPad, now being followed to market by many other tablets, potentially offers a completely integrated mobile learning device, but at a time of increasing economic pressure within higher education, is this something that libraries can afford to explore long term?

From the library's perspective the success of these pilots has been in the response from students to the delivery of digitised reading material in one (portable) place, in the amount of extra reading undertaken by students and in the resulting grades achieved (Dr Armstrong reporting the improved quality of her students assessment bibliographies), if not in the devices themselves. It would seem that the e-readers acquired by the library do not present a long term solution to the delivery of such material, with their current limited functionality. However, with the increasing number of students owning their own mobile devices, perhaps we should be concentrating on the provision of suitable content and resources, packaged and configured for mobile use, rather than providing the technology/hardware/devices to deliver it.

### NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Mallet, 'A screen too far? Findings from an e-book reader pilot', *Serials*, 23:2, July 2010, pp. 140-44
- 2 Newcastle University News (2010): 'Borrow a Sony e-reader', available from [http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/about/news/details.php?news\\_id=217](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/about/news/details.php?news_id=217) accessed 20 June 2011
- 3 University of Sheffield (2011) Library news: 'eBook reader evaluation survey', available from <http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/lib-news/ebooksurvey.html> accessed 20 June 2011
- 4 Princeton University (2010) E-reader Pilot Program at Princeton, Fall 2009 [website Princeton University, available from <http://www.princeton.edu/ereaderpilot/> accessed 20 June 2011
- 5 Penn State University Libraries (2011) E-Readers [website]. Penn State University Libraries, available from <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/researchguides/ereaders.html> accessed 20 June 2011