Kindle Project at the University of Chester

Fiona McLean
Subject Librarian
University of Chester
f.mclean@chester.ac.uk

Joanna Shepherd
E-resources and Distance
Learning Librarian
University of Chester
j.shepherd@chester.ac.uk

Towards the end of 2010, Learning and Information Services (LIS) at the University of Chester decided that we should develop and undertake a pilot project to explore how useful e-readers are in a university setting and whether they could help to resolve issues of resource availability. The project team (Fiona McLean, Joanna Shepherd and Jenny Warren) began to look at suitable devices, considering the Amazon Kindle, netbooks and iPads. Kindles were eventually chosen for their single purpose as e-book readers, long battery life, relative low cost and the relative breadth and depth of material in the Kindle bookstore.

Project plan

We intended initially to run the pilot with a distance-learning foundation degree cohort who had previously reported difficulties in accessing book stock and other library resources. However, after finding that there were not many items on their reading lists in e-book (and particularly Kindle) format, we concluded that another group should be the focus of the project.

Key factors in finding a pilot group were:

- size of group (we did not want more than about thirty students)
- the need to have buy-in and commitment from programme leaders
- the need to have a subject area where there was good e-book availability (and especially in Kindle format)

- the need to work with a programme that promoted and supported the use of e-books in teaching and learning

With these criteria in mind, the programme leaders of an English language programme were approached to see if they would be willing for their second-year students to be part of the project. Staff were very keen to be involved and it was agreed that the pilot would run for six months.
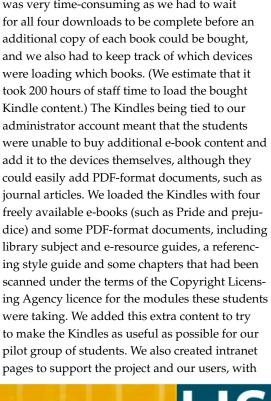
PROJECT PROGRESS

We placed an order for thirty Kindles in late 2010 and immediately hit a stumbling block as it was difficult to get hold of them in the run-up to Christmas; Amazon would not despatch more than four devices per order, which meant the start date of the project had to be delayed until January 2011.

Once the decision had been made to use Kindles, further investigative work into purchasing e-books and what the licences permitted was carried out. A plea for help and clarification of licence terms went out via the lis-link e-mail distribution list and although some useful advice was received it was clear that buying e-books for multiple e-readers would not be straightforward. We also contacted Amazon about the possibility of loading Kindle titles onto more than one device and we eventually concluded that we were allowed to load each purchased title onto four separate devices. Discussions with the programme leaders yielded additional relevant books in the Kindle store that were not on module reading lists, and we bought a combination of twenty core and background reading titles.

One administrator account was used to buy content for the Kindles. Each copy of the e-books selected had to be purchased separately

and then loaded onto four devices at a time. This was very time-consuming as we had to wait for all four downloads to be complete before an additional copy of each book could be bought, and we also had to keep track of which devices were loading which books. (We estimate that it took 200 hours of staff time to load the bought Kindle content.) The Kindles being tied to our administrator account meant that the students were unable to buy additional e-book content and add it to the devices themselves, although they could easily add PDF-format documents, such as journal articles. We loaded the Kindles with four freely available e-books (such as Pride and prejudice) and some PDF-format documents, including library subject and e-resource guides, a referencing style guide and some chapters that had been scanned under the terms of the Copyright Licensing Agency licence for the modules these students were taking. We added this extra content to try to make the Kindles as useful as possible for our pilot group of students. We also created intranet pages to support the project and our users, with

LIS
Learning and Information Services

Kindle Project

LIS is undertaking a project with students in the English Language department to evaluate the usefulness of Amazon Kindle e-book readers in an academic context. It will run from February 2011 until May 2011.

Instructions for using the Kindles

- As with all electronic devices, take care not to drop, wet or overheat your Kindle.
- Take a look at the Amazon Kindle website for initial support.
- Watch these YouTube clips on getting started with a Kindle: clip one, clip two or clip three.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do I set up a Wi-Fi connection off-campus or in a new location?
2. How do I charge the battery?
3. Does the screen light up?
4. How do I navigate through an e-book?
5. How can I return to the main contents page?
6. Will the Kindle remember the last page I read?
7. How do I return to the start of a book? Or go to a specific page?
8. How do I check the definition of a word in the text?
9. Can I change the text size?
10. Can I enlarge or zoom in on an image?
11. How do I use the Text-to-Speech function?
12. Can I see all the notes and highlights I have made?
13. How do I cite material I read on a Kindle in my assignment?
14. How do I transfer e-books onto the reader?
15. What can I do if the Kindle freezes?
16. How can I get in touch with the project team?

Many of these responses to frequently asked questions have been taken from the Amazon Kindle support website to help you. They have been adapted specifically for University of Chester students and staff.

LIS Helpdesk

The Helpdesk Service provides a single point of contact for support and assistance for computing queries at the University of Chester. To request assistance, or report a problem, contact us in person by visiting one of our helpdesks, by using the LIS self-service facility on the Portal (click on the LIS Helpdesk icon) by e-mail lis.helpdesk@chester.ac.uk or phone the appropriate site below.

Helpdesk Opening Hours

Seaborne 01244 5111234

Monday – Thursday 8.30am – 9pm
Friday 8.30am – 8pm
Saturday – Sunday 12 – 6pm

Riverside 01244 512345

Monday – Friday 8.30am – 8pm
Saturday – Sunday 12 – 6pm

Broomhead 01925 5344284

Monday – Friday 8.30am – 8pm
Saturday – Sunday 12 – 6pm

Project web page

links to YouTube videos about using the readers, as well as an FAQ page.

We devised questionnaires for our pilot – one to be completed at the start of the project and one at the end. The initial questionnaire was designed to capture quantitative and qualitative data about our student group, asking, for example, about their use of print materials, their level of IT skills and their use of online e-books in general. It also asked about their views and expectations of the project before it started – if they could see any benefits or drawbacks of using a Kindle for their academic work and how else LIS could use Kindles. The final questionnaire sought to ascertain how the students felt about the experience. We hoped that the two questionnaires would give us enough comparable information to gauge the effectiveness of the project.

We arranged with one of the programme leaders that we would take over a core module lecture to launch the project with the students. We gave each student a Kindle (with a charger and quick-start guide) and a protective cover, and explained the project to them. We showed them how to use the Kindles and also pointed them towards the intranet support pages we had written. Each student then completed the initial questionnaire. The students left the initial session with the Kindles and returned them from June 2011 onwards. They were then asked to complete the final questionnaire about their Kindle project experience.

Initial questionnaire results

Twenty-three students participated in the project and all claimed to have moderate to excellent IT skills. The average age of the group was 20; 13% of the group were male and 87% female. They all said they made regular use of the library to borrow books: 78% borrowed books not found on their reading lists and 65% liked to use e-books. Only one student owned a Kindle already.

Of the 23 participants, only one thought that they would not use the Kindle for their academic work. The students' main reasons for considering using the Kindles were the ease of having multiple resources in one place, and convenience (especially when travelling). They particularly liked being able to access texts over and above their library loan allocation. Students also saw the devices as being environmentally friendly.

Some were concerned that the Kindles would break easily, being lightweight and 'flimsy', while others worried that they would lose any notes they had made if the device stopped working. They also saw other drawbacks for academic work – the difficulty of interacting with the text (especially when note-taking) and the fact that one cannot print from Kindles.

The students felt that they would use the Kindles primarily for carrying out research for their assignments, in particular for highlighting relevant quotations and chapters. Half the participants thought that they would use the devices to make notes and for revision purposes.

64% of the participants thought that e-books would not replace the need for printed books in the future – that 'people will always admire the authenticity and quality of books' and 'hard copy books are still around and still just as popular today despite modern day technology'. Others commented that people prefer books as they can write on them, fold the pages over and that they do not require batteries. The group saw Kindles as supplementing the library's printed collection rather than replacing it.

Final questionnaire results

Sixteen of the 23 participants returned their final questionnaire and 80% of them said that they had used their Kindle during the project. The group was asked if they had used the Kindle as they had expected to at the start of the project. 37% had done so, finding it most useful when travelling – one participant also commented that they had enjoyed using the 'text to voice' feature. The remaining 63% said that they had not used the Kindle as much as they had expected, most saying that they found that they preferred to use e-books on their laptops or PCs.

When asked if they thought that participating in the Kindle project had a positive impact on their academic work, only 31% of the group said that they felt they had benefited, finding the devices quick and easy to use and good for carrying about – they also liked being able to access multiple texts without visiting the library. One student commented that the Kindles offered a 'very exciting and modern approach to reading and revision'.

69% said that their academic work had not benefited from using the Kindle. A number of students said that the devices were frustrating to use and that they could only access one book at a time, whereas they could access multiple texts at once via laptops or PCs. Some commented that

they found the range of texts on the device quite limited and that they had still made use of the library's resources.

The majority said that they had really appreciated being able to make use of the Kindle and had enjoyed taking part in the project, but most did not see the Kindle as replacing their need to access print or e-resources via the library. They commented that the Kindles provided 'a sense of what it could be like for future students' and 'a different way to research and study rather than taking books out of a library'. However, the project had not inspired any of the students to buy their own Kindle.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this project showed us that the purchase of Kindles would not be beneficial for the types of academic use we envisaged. However, various factors may have affected these students' reactions to the Kindles. They were a campus-based group, and so able to access our physical resources easily. They were also studying a subject traditionally focused on working with books, and will have had long practice of working that way in their previous study experiences. The fact that they could not add bought e-book content to the Kindles may have limited their appeal and usefulness; and students preferred accessing e-books via laptops or PCs. This possibly says something about the way today's students work – that they flip between areas of interest more readily than they used to and can deal with distractions, or do not even consider them to be distractions.

Four Kindles came back with broken screens – a failure rate high enough to warrant concern if they should ever be used on a wider basis.

We concluded that campus-based students in a book-based subject did not find enormous value in using material given to them on Kindles. It would be interesting to see whether a project with distance learners or non-campus based students, who generally find it more difficult to access physical academic resources, had the same results, Initial positive responses about using the Kindles were not sustained to the end of the project and our final conclusion is that the devices are not particularly useful for this group of students.