Digital Initiatives Symposium

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Lightning Talk: eStudybooks: Affordable Digital Textbooks for Higher Education in the Netherlands

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Presenter 1 Title
Pim Slot

Session Type
10-minute lightning talk

Abstract
SURF, the collaborative organisation for IT in education and research in the Netherlands, is trying to set up a national service for digital textbooks in higher education. From 2017 onwards, several pilots have been executed in order to find out how such a service should function. Which model would work? An "All You Can Read" Spotify-like model? A “Read What You Need” Model? And what would the digital infrastructure look like for such a service? A national platform? Or is standardization sufficient, and can every university choose its own platform? Can universities continue to get away with shifting responsibility for the purchase of learning resources to the student?

The pilots made it clear that a number of conditions must be met for the desired service to succeed:

• The most important condition is that the institutions must have a shared vision of the need for the development of a digital learning environment. If everyone wants something different, then getting such a complex service off the ground is like herding cats.
• Secondly, publishers must be prepared to leave their paper business behind to participate in the transformation to digital.
• Finally, institutions must play a more active role when it comes to creating a level and inclusive playing field in the classroom in regards to access to affordable textbooks. much like the US-invented Inclusive Access model.

Location
KIPJ Room EF

Keywords
OERs, Textbooks, Affordable Learning, eTextbooks

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eStudybooks: Affordable Digital Textbooks for Higher Education in the Netherlands

SURF, the collaborative organisation for IT in higher education and research in The Netherlands, is trying to set up a national service for digital textbooks for students in higher education. From 2017 on, several pilots have been executed in order to find out how such a service should look like.

In 2017 SURF tested a small scale Proof of Concept of this service to be used by 200 bachelor degree students in psychology at the Erasmus University in the city of Rotterdam. In 2018 and 2019 a follow up pilot was organised for a group of undergraduate students from several disciplines at a School for Applied Sciences in the city of Groningen.

The initial idea was to try and implement an ‘All You Can Read’ model, like Spotify in the music industry. This concept met with the unwillingness of publishers, who see nothing in a model where the income from student subscriptions is distributed among publishers on the basis of a distribution key. That is why we chose to test a so called ‘All You Need To Read’ model. Students could purchase a package of assigned textbooks that were put on the reading list by their teacher.

SURF learned a lot from these tests. An important lesson is that students hardly adopt any textbook when they are not sure the teacher will use it in class, whether the book is in print or digital. If we know that a successful implementation depends to a large extent to the ability to scale up the service, this was an alarming signal. Also, the fact that we did not succeed in convincing more institutions to participate in the pilots was a bad sign.

In my presentation I will argue that some crucial conditions have to be met for services like eStudybooks to succeed.

First, institutions must have a shared vision of the need for the development of a digital learning environment. If everyone want something different, organising a complex service like eStudybooks is like herding cats.

Secondly, publishers must be prepared to leave their own paper business behind and participate in the transformation towards digital. They must also accept that SURF and its members do not allow publishers to try and implement their own courseware platforms on campus. We do not want their students forced to jump from one platform to the next.

Finally, the institutions must take their responsibility when it comes to making the core textbooks available to their students. They cannot continue to get away with shifting responsibility for obtaining the learning material to the students alone. In that light, the US-invented Inclusive Access model seems to be a promising model for higher education in the Netherlands as well.