

PRINT TO DIGITAL: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHOICE



By Ellen McNair



At a recent networking event, a discussion started with the question, “Are all of the books really going away?” My colleagues described new print acquisitions, purchased to support various upcoming class projects. In more than one instance, multiple digital resources were identified that students could use, but print sources were ordered for reasons that were not easily articulated. It made me wonder, “What is our map? How will we navigate this transition from print to more and more digital resources? Will this be a marginally random endeavor, our decisions driven by the timeline of resources as they become available, or should we craft a plan?”

THE CONTINUING VALUE OF PRINT

Many colleagues agreed that print sources will continue to have value as we move forward in the digital age. This is true, not because some of us simply like books, or because we are sentimental about holding a book in a cozy corner by the fireplace, or even because we are worried that if books go, we will go with them. Print sources will continue to have value in different schools for different reasons. Perhaps there will simply be fewer of them, or perhaps hardware purchases might not keep up with public education demands. Or perhaps funds are not available to purchase the same number of books at the same rate we have in the past *and* increase the digital resources students need to transition into a global, digital workforce. Knowing that fewer print books will be purchased increases the significance of our choices. How will we make those choices? How will we establish a bar to measure our progress? Although a pre-determined map (up 40 percent in databases, down 40 percent in books?) may be too formulaic, we need a deliberate focus as we chart new territory.

A MAP FOR THE TRANSITION

The decisions about which print sources to order and which ones to weed into extinction are based on several variables: the unique demographic in each school, how student reading levels align to available digital sources, required student projects and essential content, and the subjects and reading levels represented by the digital resources in our libraries. The expectation is that we will make an enormous contribution to student success because the infrastructure of learning is about information access and literacy. Incorporating these factors into a plan is integral to meeting this expectation.



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ONE SCHOOL'S PLAN

Based on the factors mentioned, with an emphasis on the student population and needs in J.E.B. Stuart High School (58 percent free and reduced lunch and 34 percent English as a second language learners) and the existing relevant academic content in our current research databases, we are narrowing the focus of our print source acquisitions. This year the list has six areas of interest for ordering print resources. Next year, we will have three, perhaps four. The list will narrow each year.

Narrative nonfiction: There is increasing emphasis on this genre. At this time, students will be more likely to discover it in print sources than online or in a digital download format. A marketing or project plan to lead students to "discover" this genre in digital format will be part of the roll-out before we move to more digital narrative nonfiction.

Ancient Civilizations: Level 3 (out of 4) English as a second language students prefer print sources for longer projects, where pages of text are robustly supported by pictures and captions. Digital resources, including databases, are being revised continually, addressing the increased need for pairing graphics and text appropriate for hi/lo readers at the high school level. We have incorporated some new resources in this content area, making it possible for students to alternate between their preferred print sources and the digital ones.

Countries and Immigration: Students who are new to the United States often have projects

related to their countries of origin. In reducing barriers to learning and leveling the playing field, these students must have a choice in order to locate text that works for them. They clearly benefit from alternating between computers/digital resources and print resources.

Civil War: We have a robust collection of print sources related to Civil War battles. We also have salient content information in our social studies databases. Considering your print strengths is important in the transition. We will likely not order any more Civil War books, but we will not be weeding the ones we have for some time. They are in excellent condition, and the information is not outdated. While we have digital sources on this topic, the books have a variety of valuable information with better pictures that support the text—something that even our strongest, highest level readers appreciate when studying this topic, rich with facts and nuance.

New Popular Fiction: We need these books in print until we are prepared to put e-readers and downloadable books into the hands of all students.

Memoirs: Multiple classes have memoir assignments each year. With consideration to the assignments and to the limitations of the digital resources available onsite, memoirs will be on the print acquisition radar for another one to two years. After that time, we anticipate having enough digital resources in downloadable format to limit print orders. Once again, until we are sure that our students have adequate access to enough online resources, we will maintain this part of our print collection.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As a profession, we have always been poignantly sensitive about collection development, making sure that each acquisition aligns with standards for student achievement, content, reading levels, targeted interests, and identified gaps in the collection. It is exciting to move aggressively from this generic model of print source ordering to digital source selection in a systematic elimination of obsolete materials and acquisition of critical new ones. These are going to be library specific decisions.

The replacement sequence of print resources with digital ones is going to be different in each library, but each librarian can develop a map, moving forward based on these or self-selected variables. A thoughtful analysis is a powerful asset in the task of teaching research skills and multiple literacies.

Publishing delays are not new, but the dilemma was recently highlighted in a conversation with a science teacher. After mentioning that

While we have digital sources on the Civil War, our print books have a variety of valuable information with better pictures that support the text—something that even our strongest, highest level readers appreciate when studying this topic.



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anything published in print about cancer, or any genetic disease, is outdated before it reaches our hands, we enjoyed thinking: Now we can do something about it. How true is that of science and technology books in general? On the other hand, science databases are updated *daily*.

FUNDING ALTERNATIVES

At a recent tri-state consortium, the discussion of budget limitations for purchasing digital resources was a lively one. Money is all about choices. Funding for new databases is sparse. Consider alternatives:

- Put 80 percent of your new science, technology, poetry, and biography print source orders (or other subject areas in which you might consider leaning more heavily on digital sources) on hold for one year in order to reallocate the funds for one content-specific database. For funds that disappear if they are not encumbered, try negotiating a shorter contract with the digital vendor.
- Set a goal. Decide which print sources you can afford to reduce or eliminate based on the variables described above. Revisit your goals at the end of the year. Some will change each year based on your analysis of new variables and new resources. It's important to start looking at and discussing digital resources in order to understand the choices.
- Explore the option of re-allocating funds to purchase a database for all schools in a district to share.
- Expand student horizons by providing instruction in appropriate use of the web—good digital citizenship, website assessment with an emphasis on authenticity and bias,

and web-based citation tools. When database offerings cannot be increased, introducing these concepts through a generic search engine with web assessment goals can provide essential 21st century skills.

SETTING YOUR SAIL

If you think this approach is too slow and you might be left in the dust by libraries that are moving at lightning speed, acquiring several new databases, multiple e-readers each year, you are wrong. We are trusted to make decisions about the best resources to purchase based on our demographics and standards. As you transition into using more digital resources, consider with each decision that you will be giving your 21st century students many advantages: current information, technology skills, more opportunities to learn about ethical use of information on the web, productive searching, web assessment, and appropriate, discriminate use of Google and Wikipedia. Our students are in a digital world and they like it. They are engaged with it and they know how to access it. Let's give it to them with purpose, a plan, and wrapped in the highest ethical use imaginable.

EMPTY SHELVES: NOT!

All of these changes beg the question "What will happen to our shelving?" Here are a few ideas:

- Take out a few shelves and add more tables, perhaps a few more comfortable chairs, an inviting rug, or a life-size art project that inspires witty conversation and stimulates questions for critical thinking.
- Display more student work and projects. The signage inviting students to view the work of their peers should be celebratory ("Look! Mr.

Vanderburgh's class brings life to ancient civilizations!")

- Display more fiction and book covers. The cover sells a book. Spreading books out to showcase more book covers will be more enticing.
- Display database logos and their focus of learning. We are advertising learning.
- Use large signage with great literary quotes, quotes from new fiction, and URLs that lead to author blogs and book trailers. Showcase photos of upcoming school field trips and pair them with the research database logos leading to robust topical information.
- Think big: Use a flat panel monitor to display signage and directions to these new resources, alternating this information with student-created book trailers, Web 2.0 projects, database features, and advantages.

CHANGE IS GOOD

Dream big and plan for success. Instead of wondering whether or not you are going to reduce the number of print sources you will be ordering, start by sharing information with your colleagues about which sections of your print collection will need to stay intact for the next two years, based on your demographics, your standards, and the pricing of the digital resources you need. Start planning which shelves to move to make room for more seating. Share thoughts about the emerging formula in your library: 60 percent less on print, 60 percent more on electronic resources and e-readers? Forge a new path.

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