Future of school textbooks written in cyberspace

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Northwest Missouri State University students started spring semester classes Monday, but many aren't lugging thick textbooks around campus.

Instead, most students are carrying a lightweight electronic device that can fit in a coat pocket and hold the textbook material for all their classes. Some students will download their text information onto their laptops.

At Northwest, textbooks - at least the bound kind - are fast becoming a thing of the past.

Besides taking a load off students' backs, going textbook-free can save them a lot of money.

The pilot electronic textbook program began in the fall with four classes and about 200 students. This spring, roughly 4,000 of the school's 6,500 students will use electronic textbooks.

"I think that it's the way the world is going," said Dean L. Hubbard, Northwest's president, who is retiring in July after 25 years at the Maryville, Mo., university.

Textbook publishers say many colleges are moving toward using some electronic textbooks, but Northwest's plan to eventually eliminate all bound textbooks makes it a leader in the movement.

"Right now, digital products account for a small percent of our higher education business, but it is growing at a rate that is breathtaking," said Jeffrey Ho, a product manager for McGraw-Hill Education.

But Northwest can only move toward a bookless campus as fast as the availability of e-books allows, Hubbard said.

"Publishers don't have all textbooks online yet," he said. "But I would think as a realistic measure we could be totally out of the printed textbook business in three years."

That idea pleases sophomore Mike Jenkins.

"I think the whole concept is pretty cool," said Jenkins, 19, of Lee's Summit, Mo. Jenkins used e-books in his history class during the fall semester.

"I would like it if we didn't have textbooks at all anymore," he said. "You wouldn't have the hassle of messing with books. The e-book is so convenient, and you don't have to carry all those books around."

Plus, unlike printed textbooks, e-books have pop-up interactive quizzes and the ability to search the full text within seconds for key words. New electronic reader technology also will allow students to take notes in on-screen posted notes.

Jenkins found a few "minor" problems with the e-reader gadget that he and his classmates used.

"You can't look at a whole page on one screen, and it doesn't have a backlight to light up the screen, so you have to be somewhere that is well lit," he said.

Not all students were as comfortable with the electronic textbooks.

"I always worried that something would happen, like it would crash on the night I had to study for a test," said Jennifer Martin, a 22-year-old Northwest senior from Liberty, Mo.

"It's a good concept, but I didn't like it that much. I would rather flip pages back and forth in the textbook when I'm studying. Maybe it would be better to start this with freshmen who haven't yet gotten used to studying using a regular textbook."

Students who want a traditional textbook could still get one.

But the cost savings are hard to ignore, even at Northwest, a school that already is unique because of its textbook rental system and its history of giving every student a laptop.

A textbook-free campus would save the university about $400,000 a year. Currently the university spends about $800,000 a year to keep an inventory of about 50,000 to 80,000 textbooks that are rented out to students. Northwest students pay about $80 to $90 a semester on books, a fraction of what students at other schools pay.

Northwest will continue to charge students just a rental fee. But once the e-book program goes campuswide, Hubbard said, Northwest students' book fee will be cut in half.

E-books are less expensive than bound books, which are updated every few years and then have to be repurchased by the school. E-books can be updated at no cost.

Even at schools without a rental system, students would pay far less for texts on e-books than they would for bound books.

Nationally, the cost of textbooks has soared in the last decade. The average college student spends nearly $1,000 a year on textbooks, according to the National Association of College Stores.

Northwest will purchase the electronic readers and then load them with the e-books each student needs. The student would pick up their loaded e-reader at the university bookstore or have their electronic textbooks loaded on their laptop.

The e-book plan is being phased in, with more faculty members signing up each year to teach classes using electronic textbooks.

"We think that students who are coming to Northwest today are more comfortable with learning from electronic text because they are used to reading from a computer screen," said Paul Klute, assistant to the president at Northwest.

"It's nothing for a student to read for two or three hours on a computer screen."

University faculty members are getting used to the idea of Northwest doing away with bound textbooks, but they hope students can choose to read the e-books on laptops, e-readers or iPods.

"We are going to have to have multiple modes of delivery," said Rod Barr, an agriculture instructor who used the e-reader gadget in one of his fall classes. "Not all students are the same and not all classes use textbooks in the same way."

Barr said the e-reader used by his students had limited use for class discussions requiring students to jump around from chapter to chapter.

"It's a good device for straight front-to-back novel reading, though," he

said.

He said the more technologically savvy students in his class used the device the most, "but they also had the greatest expectations."

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