Institution as e-textbook publisher project: the authors’ views on writing e-textbooks (November 2016)

Motivations for joining the project team

People (but particularly authors) joined the project because of their commitment to finding a new way of providing students with the resources they need for their course at an affordable price or free. They tend to be advocates of open access publishing or open education generally, even if it was a work-related role that brought this project to them. The excitement of innovation, and being part of something new was also mentioned by many. Frequently, the CFP (call for participation) was felt to chime with existing initiatives underway at the HEI, so the project became a natural extension of that work and provided an opportunity to undertake more thorough testing of ideas. For many authors the idea of writing a book had formed in their minds before the project came into being, and the project was the final nudge to actually deciding to write it and finalise the details.

Other reasons to be involved included the feeling of control the project gave authors, in comparison to working with a large and distant commercial publishing house. They felt the relationship with the staff involved in publishing their book was more personal. It was much easier to get hold of someone and discuss any aspects and there were fewer decisions over which they would have no control, such as layout, or cover artwork. They felt more like an equal partner in the book’s progress rather than simply an author who handed over responsibility with their final draft. Many mentioned the possibility of being able to update their work quickly when they felt it was necessary, due in part to the digital format but also because of the closer relationship. This closeness also had downsides however, as several felt that they had perhaps become involved in too many aspects, leaving them with more work to do overall.

Only one team offered any monetary incentive to editors or contributors, but even these individuals were quick to point out that financial reward was not the reason for participation in the project. One other team offered authors “buy-out” from their regular teaching and administration duties to allow space to enable the writing. The other two project teams relied on authors to write for the benefit of their careers, their students, and their personal satisfaction and development, all aspects mentioned by those who had been paid in some way as well. As several people pointed out, even commercial publishers seldom offer sufficient financial incentives to be a very big factor when academic authors consider the benefits of writing a book, even a textbook where potential royalty payments would be likely to be higher than for other kinds of book.

Staff other than authors were usually completing the project just as another aspect of their existing jobs, whereas the authors, be they sole, joint, editor or contributor, had a much more voluntary element to taking part. Nevertheless, on the whole non-writing staff were also in favour of the principles of OA (open access) publishing because it was part of the culture of the organisation in which they worked.

What they found good about the project, the things they enjoyed the most.

Overwhelmingly, learning new things and new skills was most often-mentioned when participants were asked about what they had found good about the project. This applied to all kinds of staff, whether they were involved in writing, publishing or technological aspects. All said that the experience had been worthwhile, and would help them in their working lives going forward. A number of academic staff talked about how writing the book had helped them develop their pedagogy and that this would feed back into their teaching in the future. Research-led teaching was also mentioned by some academics, with the idea that project methods and models might possibly be adapted in the future to enable them to experiment with student-generated content to fulfil this important goal for many HEIs (higher education institutions). Several academics also mentioned name recognition and enhancement to their reputation as benefits of working on the project.

Working with the new team that the project generated, making new connections across functions and generally having new relationships for the future were common positive outcomes. Everyone was pleased with the finished books, or the part of the books finished when we spoke, and felt that they had not only produced something worthwhile and pleasing, but that they had contributed to enabling students to have the resources they needed for their courses. All were aware of the high prices often asked for commercially-produced texts,
the inability of university libraries to provide sufficient copies to meet demand, and the problems encountered by distance-learning students in finding the right resources. Lecturers also pointed out the mismatch between most textbooks and what was taught, meaning that even expensive books were seldom ideal for student use whereas their own were much better suited.

Negative aspects

Everyone was quick to point out that their positive experiences of the project far out-weighed any negatives. The negative everyone experienced was that everything took longer than planned. For authors it was simply more work in total and too time-consuming and/or distracting from their teaching and administrative roles than anticipated. For other staff it was more likely to be technical aspects that hadn’t been closely enough specified at the beginning, or were simply outside their previous experience and so took time to learn about.

All involved in the project felt they had been on a learning journey, but the inevitable downside of this is slower progress than there would have been with more experienced personnel in place. This is highlighted by several project participants across teams saying that despite the collaborative aspects of the project being good, it did mean that more time was spent discussing certain issues than was perhaps strictly necessary.

Would they do it again and what would they change?

Almost every person when asked said they would do it again, with most pointing out that simply keeping what they had written so far up-to-date entailed a commitment to future engagement with the books. For a few authors it was a qualified yes, because of the size of the task and the commitment, so it would depend on either having more time allocated from other work or finding different ways of overcoming problems encountered. But overall, the response was an enthusiastic ‘yes’.

Things they would change were related to the negative aspects identified, such as having better specification for technical aspects earlier or a more rigid template in place for writing. All felt that the experience of the project meant that many issues had now been solved and processes were now in place to ensure that any further book publishing in their HEI would be a much smoother process.

Ideas about the future

No-one felt that the project concept was either impossible or undesirable to expand, in fact most people thought there were only a few reasons why it might not be taken up readily by others either in their own institution or elsewhere. Staff other than authors or editors found fewer problems with the idea of expansion since they had already dealt with teething problems during the project’s work.

Authors had more reservations. An emergent theme was the desirability of building-in the work of book writing to other work undertaken routinely by teaching academics, for example when re-writing a module or larger programme of study, so that rather than the task being an extra, it was accepted as part of what they did in the same way that specifying learning objectives or undertaking QA (quality assurance) work was now. This is a response to the strong feeling amongst authors that there is too little recognition of the size of the task and sometimes its importance, by their managers. There was often (although not always) a difference between some parts of the university and what authors experienced. For example, local managers might agree with the principle that textbook writing was desirable and should be undertaken by the university generally, but might be less willing or unable to support their own staff with time in lieu of other tasks whilst they did so. All agreed that having the approval and co-operation of the university leadership team would be necessary for any institution thinking of following their example and embarking on a publishing project.

Who was interviewed?

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