**Let’s Talk About Etextbooks**

Levi King

Online Administrator

[kingle@metrostate.edu](mailto:kingle@metrostate.edu)

Every semester there is at least one class where everybody is confused about which textbook to buy. We know the title of the required texts, but the real question is, which medium should we get it in?

Do we need the paper textbook? Does it have the required lab code? Can that lab code be bought separately? Is the etextbook included? In one of my classes, nobody was sure if the lab program came from the same company, or what devices the etextbook could be read on, or how long the license lasted. Despite the efforts of the bookstore’s staff to clear these things up for me, I wasn’t sure I had the right thing until the second week of class when everyone had a chance to compare what we bought.

In the end, I got the etextbook (with lab code) and quickly came to hate it. I could only read it in a web browser on a computer because there were no apps for my tablet or phone. In double-page view, the text was too small, and the zoom went from tiny to huge with nothing between. In single-page view, the pages jerked up and down as I tried to scroll, and I frequently lost my place. Random words were highlighted, and clicking them brought up “definitions” that were often wrong. Even the search function was broken.

You might wonder which publisher made this etextbook so you can avoid them. Here’s the thing – they’re all this bad. I have tried half a dozen brands on as many devices, and none of them really worked. Many classmates echo my thoughts: etextbooks are hard to read, they lack basic features and they are barely cheaper than the paper versions.

It’s not as if regular ebooks are plagued with these issues. Between Amazon’s Kindle, Barnes & Noble’s Nook and countless apps, it’s a thriving market. They’re readable, they’re searchable, and some even have very nice note-taking functions built in. Even when a book isn’t easily found in an ebook format, it’s probably out there in PDF.

The services tied to etextbooks are often much better than the texts themselves. I’ve taken math courses with mediocre etextbooks that were redeemed by really excellent built-in practice programs. In this semester’s case, the lab program and the etextbook are from the same company, and while the labs are great, the etextbook is broken.

So what’s the problem? Why is it that etextbooks are lagging so far behind ebooks? Why do companies that make great online quizzes or practice programs have so much trouble making decent reading programs? We can’t say for sure. But we can talk about it.

While my classmates tend to agree that etextbooks just aren’t worth it, there’s always the possibility I’m missing something. Maybe other classes, in other majors, have perfectly good options. Wouldn’t it be ironic if this problem was restricted to computer science textbooks?

Whether your experience with etextbooks has been good or bad, please answer this survey:

<http://bit.ly/EtextbooksArticle>

I’ll collect the results, and we’ll return to this topic in a future issue. The more you share of what you know, the more I can share with you in return. Let’s get some data.