Textbooks in digital age

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Students in some of Dr. Eric Luczaj's technology courses at Miami University's branch campuses might not use any traditional or electronic textbooks in his classroom.

Instead, they receive links to a chapter or two of several textbooks or other materials the university has obtained through paid licenses in its media center.

Nursing students at the University of Cincinnati use a multitouch, interactive, e-textbook on iPads put together by their instructor.

While the traditional print textbook is still the predominant resource for many college classes, nontraditional sources are being used as supplemental materials and are in the infancy stage of replacing the traditional textbook.

The quickest evolving of those is the e (electronic) –textbook. Oftentimes, the cost is 40 to 60 percent cheaper than a textbook. Licenses can be obtained for six months, a year, or indefinitely.

"We don't talk as much about textbooks as we do instructional materials that could include textbooks," said Carla Chance, executive vice president at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College.

"Students often have access to online assignments and supplemental material or e-textbooks."

Not only do nontraditional tools provide a broader spectrum of learning materials, but come at a cheaper cost to students, educators say.

One such program, includED, through Follett bookstores, gives students instant access to their digital course materials by the first day of class. Limited numbers of hard copies are available to those who need them. The cost for those course materials is included on the student's tuition bill as a learning fee.

The University of Cincinnati has a similar partnership with Follett for includEd, said Chris Edwards, the university's vice president of e-learning technology. It is piloting the concept with some chemistry courses this fall.

In UC's nursing department, faculty members are restructuring content in a variety of ways for students. PowerPoint presentations, along with instructor's notes, for example, are being incorporated into multitouch books using Apple's iBook platform to create more interactive content. This fall, faculty will design study guides with notes for the iPad.

Academic Pub is one of several online sites where instructors can use content from its library to create custom materials for a course. The result is an e-textbook that is often cheaper for students than a print textbook.

There are even open educational resources – items created by individuals or institutions put in the public domain that anyone can use at no cost – for classes.

"Schools are beginning to experiment with all free materials," Chance said.

Seven years ago the Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources was created as a way to share materials for courses.

"I don't think any of these ideas are mature," Edwards said. "I think all of these are ways of creating and sharing content for students. It's moving us in a direction that is new and different."

Miami has created the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and University Assessment for it's regional campuses that looks at best methods and materials for learning. "There's a lot of opportunity for students to make a connection with different ways to present materials," Luczaj said. "We're here to help students get material and are constantly updating how we approach that."

Supporting the efforts of Luczaj and other faculty in their quest to find alternative or supplemental materials is John Burke, director of the Gardner-Harvey Library at Miami University's Middletown Campus. He looks for open educational resources, as well as licensed materials providing quizzes, information and tutorials on subjects requested by faculty to add to the school's collection. Often they can be adapted for a particular course or need.

"We have a growing number of people every semester that use these," Burke said. "It's not a majority of students. But they are finding materials they can use for their own projects. We're always trying to find tools open to everyone."