ON THE DUBLIN CORE FRONT

Books, books everywhere, but nary a one in print

Cushing Academy eliminates print books from its library

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to review Cushing Academy’s recent decision to withdraw the majority of its print book collection in favor of electronic books.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is designed to conjure thoughts regarding the role of books and their digital future, particularly in light of the Kindle and Google Books project.

Findings – The paper suggests that eliminating print books from a secondary school library may not serve well students who go on to attend universities where print books predominate.

Originality/value – The paper calls attention to the challenges libraries and institutions face in transitioning to electronic books.

Keywords Electronic books, School libraries

Paper type Viewpoint

What a school thinks about its library is a measure of what it thinks about education (Harold Howe, former US Commissioner of Education).

I was surprised to read an article appearing in the Boston Globe, and later featured in American Libraries’ AL Direct web service, regarding the elimination of books from Cushing Academy’s library (Abel, 2009). Cushing Academy, a college preparatory school located in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, recently announced it will discard its library collection of 20,000 books in favor of going almost entirely digital over the next two years. According to the Globe, Cushing will provide 18 electronic readers (Amazon Kindles and Sony Readers) into which digital books will be loaded. Cushing’s enrollment of 450 students will also be able to access e-books on their personal computers.

Cushing’s homepage (www.cushing.org) prominently displays links to articles and interviews regarding the progressive and perhaps unprecedented decision. Headmaster James Tracy in his “Library update”[1] and “Libraries beyond books”[2] articles makes a compelling case for how transforming the library’s collection in this way will broaden access to books for students and at the same time respond to the way teenagers are accustomed to interacting with information. Although I think the Kindle can be a transformative device (see “The Killer Kindle,” which appeared in the previous issue of OCLC Systems & Services), just a fraction of Cushing’s 20,000 books will fit on the electronic reader, and then only if they are available in Kindle versions. Suspecting that hundreds, if not thousands, of books from Cushing’s collection have not yet been
Kindlized, I searched 222 titles from Cushing’s online catalog – one title from each 100-record display of alphabetized results – against Amazon to see if a Kindle version of the book is available. Only 41 (18 percent) of the titles sampled are available as Kindle purchases. The list of Cushing’s books not yet available for Kindle is diverse and includes *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Prentice-Hall, 1962); *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science*, by Michael White and John Gribbin (Dutton, 1992); *Cyber Rights: Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age*, by Mike Godwin (MIT Press, 2003); and *The Origins of the Marshall Plan*, by John Gimbel (Stanford University Press, 1976). As for Google Books, although it provides free access to over two million public domain titles, I do not see the value in providing secondary school students with an overwhelming collection of old books in lieu of a carefully selected set of resources appropriate to the curriculum (Singel, 2009). Moreover, the experience of reading Google’s digitized books on a laptop or iPhone, in my view, cannot equal that of a printed book or Kindle for comfort.

After talking recently with an independent school administrator, I do not get the sense other institutions are eager to part with their print collections, though they recognize and embrace the need to integrate electronic resources – be they journals, databases, or books – into their libraries’ collections. Certainly the college-bound students leaving Cushing will discover books – hundreds of thousands of them – on the shelves of the institutions of higher learning at which they will matriculate. This point is referenced in Figure 1, which was solicited from a local school librarian after she read the *Boston Globe* article.

In response to a recent inquiry regarding use of electronic books at my library, I looked at a print collection of university press books for which we also own electronic versions. The results surprised me. Of the 63 titles, all published in 2008, 15 of them had been viewed online, while 23 of the print versions of these titles had circulated. Whereas I would have expected a strong correlation between electronic and print use, there were only six titles that were both viewed online and had circulated. The print circulation rate for these titles is roughly the same (37 percent) as the entire circulating Cushing Academy’s move to rid its school library of all books is a bit shocking. A library today needs electronic resources. But it also needs books and other print resources, like magazines and newspapers. As a librarian, it is my job to instruct students on how to find the information they are looking for from a variety of resources. By taking away a major piece of the resource pie, Cushing Academy is providing its students a quick fix, but a great disservice. A library with no books raises many questions, including:

- What happens when Cushing Academy graduates enter their college libraries, which are filled with physical books?
- Will Cushing’s students really “have access to millions of books” electronically in the 2009-2010 school year? What about the students who want to read John Grisham? You won’t find him on Kindle.
- How will the students understand the concept of serendipity – finding those hidden gems of knowledge by browsing library stacks?
- Can one acquire a lifelong love of reading on a laptop or even a Kindle?

Cushing Academy is robbing its students of the opportunity to experience books and all of the ideas and knowledge contained within them. To think of the books I could buy with the money Cushing Academy is spending on a cappuccino machine! (Ellen Potter, Director of Libraries at Tower Hill School in Wilmington, Delaware).
collection of 2008 imprints (38 percent). A similar study at Oakland University reviewed 219 books duplicated in print and the library’s NetLibrary subscription package. It found that 53 of these 219 books circulated in print, while 34 of the 219 were accessed online. A Pearson test found no correlation between use of one format prompting use of the other.

It is difficult to discern what these studies indicate, but I would suggest that at best electronic books are utilized currently as a complement to print, not as a replacement. Conversations with faculty further entrench my position that e-books are not yet an acceptable substitute for the tried-and-true print monograph. I do believe the Kindle can alter this mindset, but the lack of a business model for institutional subscriptions, as well as a host of other issues, promise to delay this revolution for some time.

Notes
1. www.cushing.org/misc/library-update.shtml
2. www.cushing.org/misc/library.shtml

References
Janes, J. (2009), “Words, words, words: within books or without, they maintain their power”, American Libraries, Vol. 40 Nos 6/7, p. 44.

Further reading

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“When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books” (Headmaster James Tracy, Cushing Academy) (Abel, 2009).

“The codex as object undoubtedly has its own special place in the pantheon. Its emotional, tactile, and historic resonance is secure” (Janes, 2009).

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