EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING ACCELERATES DIGITAL PLANS

Anna Shannon
SYP Treasurer 2020

Well. 2020 was some year wasn't it? In the world of publishing, it was educational publishing that was particularly hard hit. Schools around the world had to take action in response to the pandemic, with some needing to take more drastic action than others to be able to continue learning delivery to some degree. And it is likely that at the time this goes to print, we will still be seeing those ramifications.

The need for user friendly digital resources, which was growing anyway but a much slower rate, exploded in 2020. With so many schools closed, to be able to continue teaching, having the needed digital tools was essential. Publishers had to step up their digital focus, already on their roadmaps, to try and make as much of their front and back lists work for teachers and students in the new circumstances.

In the UK, the first national lockdown in March saw schools closing their physical doors to the majority of their student population (they did stay open at a limited capacity for students whose parents or carers were frontline workers). For those who were now learning solely from home, parents and carers had to take on the task of home schooling, which is no mean feat when juggling this additional need alongside unceasing work demands, as many had to do. And not to mention those who had more than one child at home full time. On the school front, teachers had to quickly adapt to teaching children and young adults remotely, with most going fully digital, and others taking more of a blended approach. Full appreciation goes out to them for their heroic efforts.

Pre COVID-19 most teachers were teaching with elements of digital in the classroom, but it was very much an addition to lessons or for homework, rather than lesson foundation, with print books largely still reigning king at school. However, with students now at home, accessibility prompted the popularity of e-books. Affordability too was another factor here, with the spike in e-book usage also certainly further boosted by the scrapping of the VAT e-book tax in May 2020, originally planned for 1st December 2020, having being brought forward in response to the pandemic. This trend was seen globally, with OverDrive Education reporting an 80% increase in 71 countries in usage of e-books and audio books across 38,000 schools over the last year. That's nearly triple compared to the usage in the 2019 school year. It's particularly interesting to see this, as the rapid growth of e-books has often been predicted since their creation, often going so far as to say the print market would be wiped out, but this never came to pass. Could the pandemic mean e-books will be firmly ingrained into the schooling system, rather than serving as a temporary stop gap or an addition piece? Publishers have worked hard to try and make as many print books available in e-book format, ramping up production (especially true in ELT markets).

Flexibility was a key focus here, making sure teachers could actually use the materials and tailor them to their class as needed including e-books, other digital offerings, and offline options too. There was also the delivery of the lessons to think about. With tools like Zoom and Google Classroom being used for online lesson delivery, publishers needed to consider integration and functionality with these tools with teaching resources as a much-needed support. And this support was not only for teachers, but parents too. For many home learning situations, parents and carers were integral in ensuring any kind of learning was happening at home, so there was a need to have materials and training resources for them from publishers to support their children's education as much as possible.

The 'how' in using tools and resources was another learning curve. Many educational publishers offered training sessions to teachers and school leadership teams in previous years, and 2020 highlighted this as a fast-growing need. There were short one-off webinars to large scale online conferences, covering the practicalities of using a specific coursebook to online classroom management to digital class engagement techniques to teacher and student wellbeing and so on. This training, of course, needing to

be balanced with the demands of teaching and provide real value to the teachers.

Teachers had to learn how to manage their class when not being physically present with their students for instance, transferring and adapting strategies from the physical classroom to online and/or remote teaching. They had to deal with the unseen workload of attending to individual student need alongside the class as a whole, and consider the various student learning nuances – you can't check Tom's body language as he comes into class, or Annie's understanding by coming over to her desk. Publishers offering teacher training to deal with things like changing classroom management gave that additional support to schools. I think this will become a key component of a publishers offering too, going beyond the coursebook to offer robust support.

There was also some reluctance towards new coursebooks being adopted, which is unsurprising considering the instability and the many unknowns floating around. Teachers understandably were not likely to want to use new material on top of the pandemic stress, amongst other factors. It does suggest that any new future course offerings will have to be very tightly targeted to meet teacher needs to have a chance to be adopted, and it is likely there will be an even more competitive market landscape when that window opens again, and schools may ask for more as part of the standard package.

The pandemic has forced teacher fluency in digital in a short space of time, often dealing with complex or unfamiliar systems. Publishers worked hard to try and support teachers as much as possible through accessibility and flexibility of material and extended teacher training. Seeing how the education industry adapted from the publisher to the teacher to the student, given it was a huge shift to the norm, is truly exceptional.