GREEN BOOKS? CREATING AND USING CUSTOM e-BOOKS FOR YOUR COURSE

Ed Lindoo, Ph.D.
H. Wayne Huizenga School of Business and Entrepreneurship
Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale-Davie
Florida 33314-7796 | 800-541-668
772-260-1910 direct
ed.lindoo@scripps.com

ABSTRACT

Pundits believe that print will continue to be the preferred medium for books long into the future, however, it is also widely believed that change is coming and that change will be in the form of e-books. Although the question "what is an e-book" may sound trivial, it is not, as there are many forms of e-book; those created for special e-book readers, PDAs or even a mobile phone. When searching for a new book, it is often difficult to find just one book that fits the course specifically. As a result, two books are often used within a course, one making up for the shortcomings of the other. Ultimately this kills more trees and creates more expense to the student. There is however, and alternative; custom e-books. This paper focuses not on e-books, which are electronic versions of the original print book, but on custom e-books, where multiple books from multiple authors can be put together online to create the specific content that the instructor is looking for. Done right, this can make for a very solid course book and at the same time, will save students more than 50% over the cost of a single print book.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Instructors are often taxed with developing new courses or modifying existing courses. To stay current, textbooks are typically changed every two years or so. As a result there is a constant turnover of the books that are used within our courses. Compounding this is the fact that the price of textbooks continues to rise and these increases are passed on to the students. Even more at issue is the inability to find the perfect book. That is, when looking for a new book for a course we often find books that take care of about 60-70% of our needs. Because of this we often find ourselves using two textbooks within the course, adding even more expense to the students.

An obvious solution to the expense is e-books as they typically cost 50% or less than that of the printed version. Nelson (2008) [1] presented the use of "E-books in Higher Education" and discussed the fact that we are ending an era of Hype. That is, e-books are becoming more widely used, not only in the area of higher education, but in just about every book that is being produced today. As Nelson pointed out, from just 2005 to 2006, e-book sales doubled from $10

million to $20 million and pundits agree that e-book sales will only continue to grow. No doubt e-books are becoming more and more popular, just look at the Amazon Kindle. The Kindle is an e-book specific reader that allows the user to download e-books within minutes. Then there are web sites such as ebooks.com, e-library.net, netlibrary.com, free-ebooks.net, fictionwise.com and many more. On ebook.com alone, one can find well over 130,000 e-books online.

Looking specifically for e-textbooks, a number of publishers are found such as CourseSmart (with over 6,000 e-textbooks), Pearson, Wiley, Routledge, Morgan Kaufmann and many more, however what they offer is an exact replica of the printed version in electronic format.

2.   AN ALTERNATIVE TO PRINT AND STANDARD E-BOOKS

About 18 months ago this author was in the situation most instructors often find themselves in…trying to find a new textbook and not finding one that clearly fits the needs of the course. During the process of searching a number of sites and reviewing book after book, the McGraw-Hill site came to light, specifically their Primisonline site. This is no ordinary e-book site however, but rather a site where you can build a custom book from thousands of resources. The best part is that multiple authors/books can be used to create a custom book.

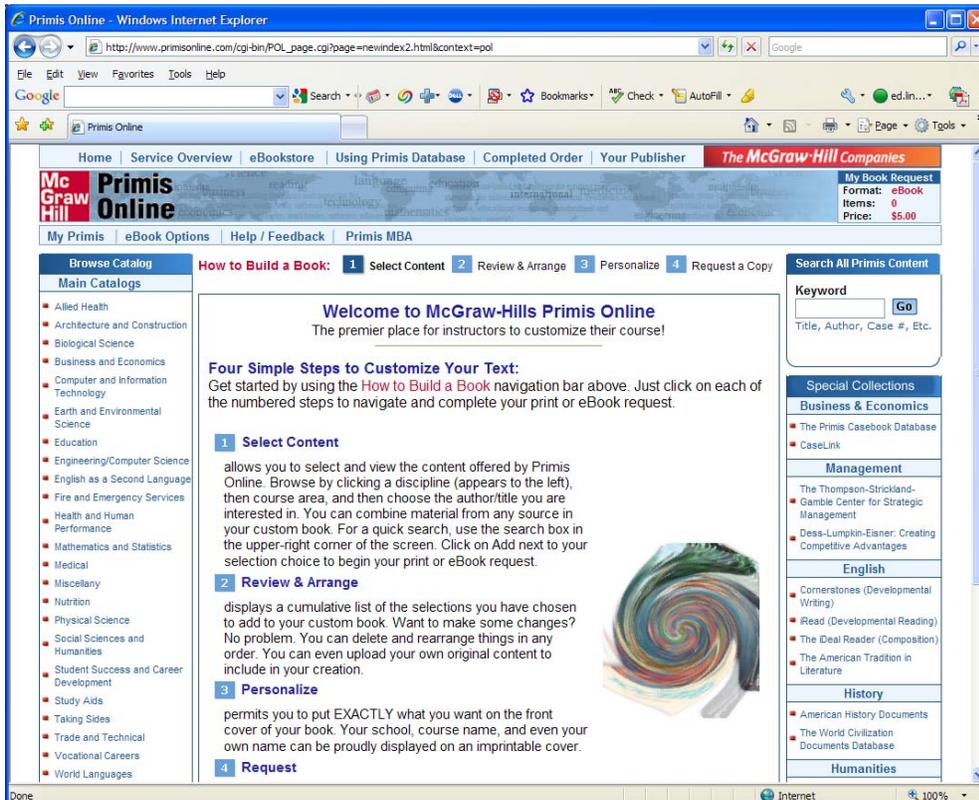To begin the process, go to www.primisonline.com. The following screen will appear:

Figure 1

Along the left side of this page are the various disciplines which can be found within the main catalog. These include Allied Health, Architecture, Biological Science and Information Technology to name a few. There are literally thousands of books and over 2.2 million pages of content that can be used to create a custom book.

After selecting one of these disciplines the user is presented with a list of the books, cases, etc. that are available. Here, Mannino: Database Design, 3rd edition was selected.
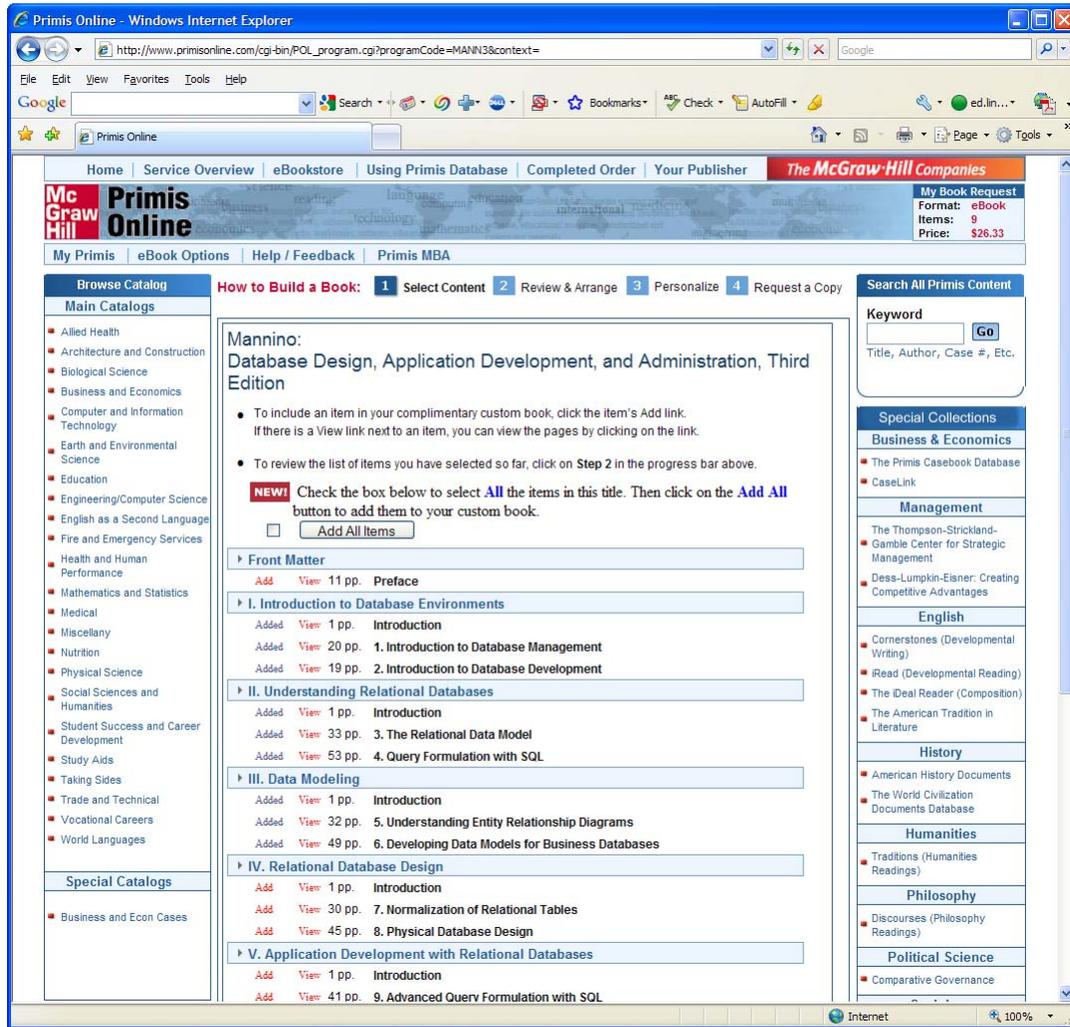

Figure 2

Picking and choosing items for the custom book is easy. Each chapter of the Mannino book is presented in the center of the screen (Figure 2). Each chapter can be viewed and/or added to the custom book simply by clicking the "Add' button. As this is done, the price of the book is recalculated in the top right corner of the screen so that one always knows what the price of this book is going to be. This is the price to the school bookstore but is also the price that McGraw-Hill will sell it to the students for from their site.

Figure 2 shows that six chapters along with their introductions have been added to this custom e-book. The next chapter of the Mannino book is on database normalization, however

the Allen-Chatwin-Creary chapter on normalization appears to be better. That chapter can be added to the e-book simply by clicking the Add button (Figure 3).
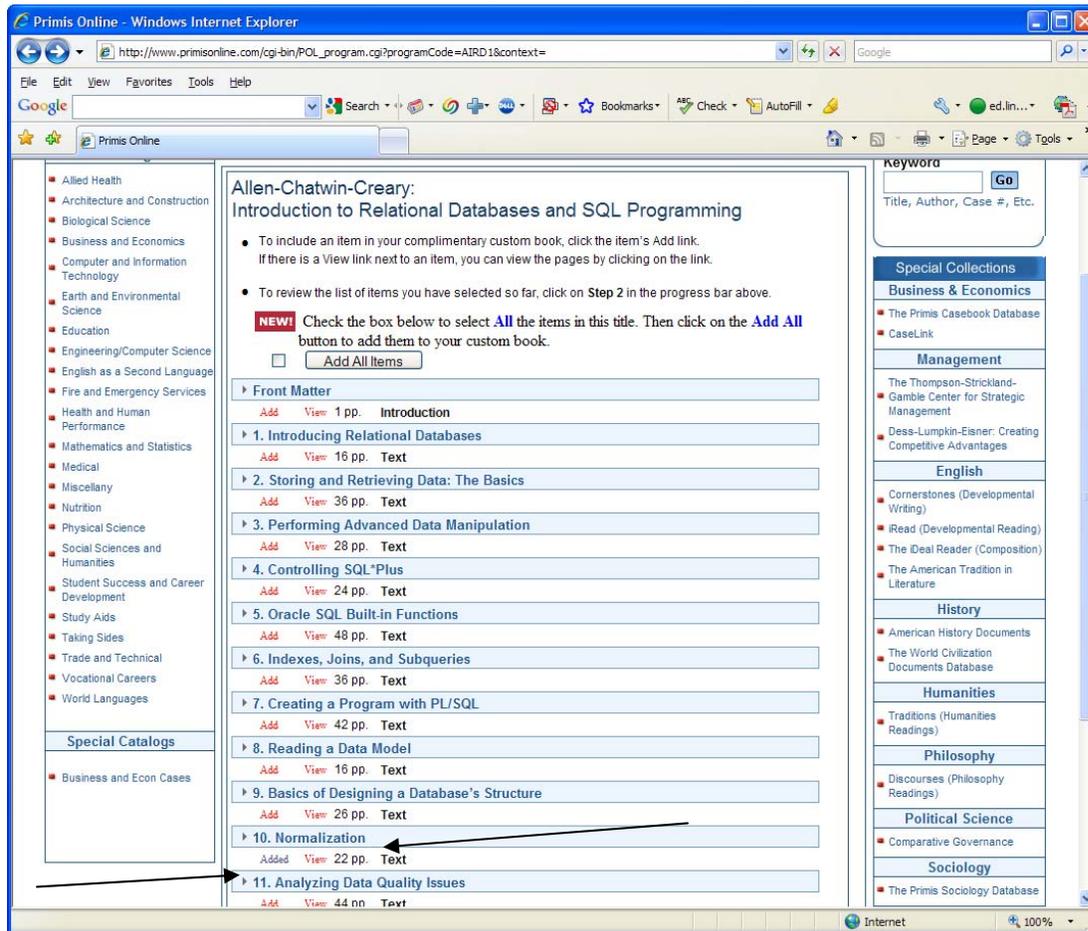

Figure 3

With all of the chapters selected, the e-book is ready for the "Review and Arrange" step on the Primisonline website (Figure 4). Chapters can easily be rearranged just by changing the ordering numbers on the left side of the center screen. Note in this case that the Allen-Chatwin-Creary chapter on Normalization has been moved to third position of this e-book. Also, note that there is more detail here on pricing (each chapters price is displayed) and it is here that the e-book creator is given the opportunity to add their own content. Content can be uploaded in Word, Excel and some other popular formats, however PDF is preferred. An example of instructor supplied content might include graphs, charts, power point slides (converted to Word or PDF) and simple text introducing a chapter or presenting questions at the end of a chapter.

After reviewing and arranging the book and uploading any instructor content, the next step is to personalize the custom e-book (step 3 on the web site).
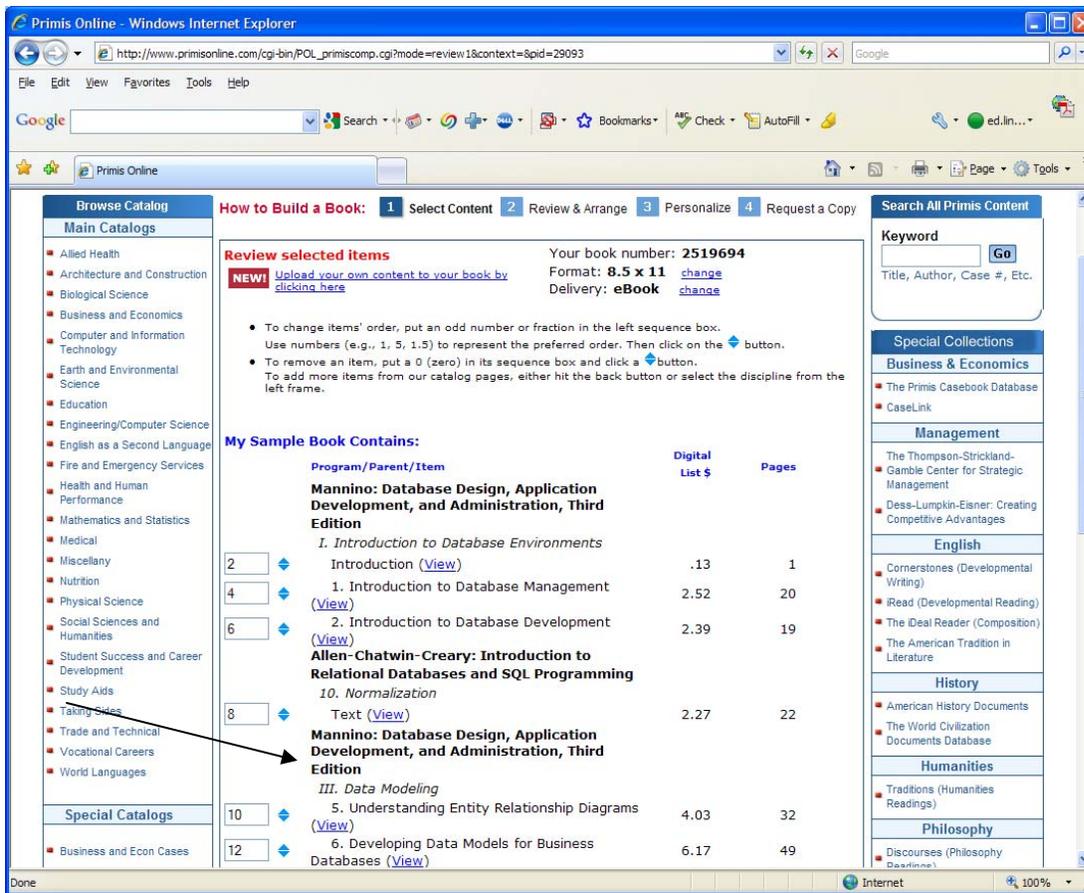
Figure 4

By personalizing, the first page of the book will show things like the discipline (Computer and Information Technology in this case), the course name and number and the school information. There is also an option to assign the instructors name here however, since most schools have a number of instructors using the same book, this is not advised (just leave the instructor name blank).

The final step is to request a copy. At this screen the user fills in basic information and submits this along with the e-book. In just a few days the e-book will be put together in PDF and emailed to the instructor for final review. After your final approval the book is given an ISBN number and is ready for use.

Having the book in PDF format is nice because it goes anywhere you go with your laptop. There are however downsides to this. First, to protect their copyright interests, McGraw-Hill has locked the PDF so that the user cannot print anything from the book. This tends to frustrate some students who would prefer to have a chart, graph or a few pages of text in their hands. Keep in mind, however, a print version of this e-book can also be created, just arrange it through McGraw-Hill. Another downside is that once the e-book is downloaded by the student, it will only work on the computer it was download to. If a student changes computers during the course they will have an issue and may have to purchase another copy of the book. Finally, just

like the inability to print, nothing in the e-book can be selected and copied. This too can be frustrating when trying to select text that you want to quote, for example.

A third option that students have is to purchase the e-book as an online book. That is, they do not download it, instead the e-book stays online and the student purchases access to it. The downside of this, however, is that the student has to go online anytime they need to review the text. This can be an obvious problem at 30,000 feet in a commercial jetliner.

3.   FEEDBACK

Student feedback has been mixed. Many students can't seem to get away from the traditional "book-in-hand" where they can highlight text, make notes, etc. Another issue in a small number of cases has been screen resolution, which sometimes is poor depending on the video capabilities of the students PC. Students who purchased the online only version (same price as the pdf version) have expressed dissatisfaction in that it is not readily available when they travel. When I point out to students how much I have saved them by reducing the required texts to just one, and often reducing the number of chapters, the overwhelming response is quite positive. As a result of the feedback I've received, I now try to let students know up front about their options and the issues that may go with them.

4.   CONCLUSION

Creating a custom e-book not only tailors the book to specific course needs, but also cuts the costs to students by 50% or more. Because e-books only work on the computer to which they were downloaded, students are unable to resell their used book to recoup some of their initial expenses. My recommendation is to offer both e-book and a print version. By providing a print version, students are still able to make notes on pages and/or highlighting text and of course can sell it when they are done. Custom e-books are not perfect. Specifically, when you create a book from an e-book and eliminate four of the twelve chapters, remaining chapters may reference diagrams or further discussion that was in a chapter you eliminated. While it may not be necessary for the course, students may feel disconnected not being able to obtain the information. Likewise, if you create a book from two or more authors there may not always be a seamless flow from chapter to chapter. This should be pointed out to the students and the best place to accomplish this is in a custom preface page at the front of the custom book.

References

[1] Nelson, M. (2008). E-Books in Higher Education: Nearing the End of the Era of Hype? Educause Review, vol 43, no. 2.