Out of the Cold: E-Reserves Serves

By Julie Hayward, Resource Sharing

Gone are the days when students rushed across town and campus and dashed inside a library a few minutes before doors were locked to get an assigned reading found on course reserve—to be copied and/or read for the next day 8:00 a.m. class. Hurrah for new technologies: digitization has impacted the way libraries provide access and few such services as are useful as “on demand” course reserves. In touch with that demand, Western Michigan University Libraries launched, during the 2007 fall term, a new library course reserves system: a program designed with our users in mind.

A necessary service

In the “old days,” traditional reserves consisted of printed books and photocopies of articles or book chapters placed in folders that were kept under tight control behind a reserve desk in Waldo or one of the branches. Circulation was often limited to two hours within the library itself. These books and photocopied articles were deemed essential by the requesting instructor to supplement the required textbooks. Unfortunately, this tie to physical objects to be read created many problems besides the procrastinating student and Michigan weather. The time pressure brought competition for copies and the folder copies were so heavily used at certain times that pages were removed or lost and copies disappeared. Moreover, the instructor and the library staff were often as frustrated as the students when student needs could not be met. As with many other records of today, the answer rested in providing electronic reserves, that is, provide online full text to all “passworded” users of that material, at any time.

Electronic reserves are not new to WMU; a form of this service has been available since 2004, but the original software didn’t meet the evolving demand. After a review of other systems, Ares, created by Atlas Systems, Inc. of Virginia Beach, VA, was selected because of the unique features that the system offers. Ares is designed to automate library course reserves for fast, efficient service for faculty, students, and library staff. The Ares Web site (http://www.atlas-sys.com/products/ares/) states that the system offers a “complete hosted solution brought to you by the designers of the ILLiad ILL system.” And, as an added incentive, the University Libraries already utilizes ILLiad for its interlibrary loans and document delivery for off-campus students. As of December 2007, WMU’s University Libraries is one of nine academic institutions using this product. Ares streamlines the reserve process by allowing faculty to create their own course pages and add their course reserve material—provided that copyright guidelines are followed.

The University Libraries, by offering electronic reserves, increases accessibility and convenience to the user community with around-the-clock access. The Libraries no longer places photocopies on physical reserve. By using the electronic format, access is provided simultaneously to all users without the worries of pages being lost or torn. This system not only identifies electronic full-text documents, it also cites the print books the instructor may have placed on reserve. The end result is a one-stop shopping. One limitation exists, i.e., the complete physical book must still be accessed in person, at the library. Copyright law does not, without specific permission by the publisher, permit online access to entire or large portions of books.

Breadth of services

Ares, as a total system, offers a variety of additional options.

- This is a Web based product that is customized for the University Libraries’ Web presence.
- Each student/user creates a personal account with a username and password.
- Instructors have the capability to clone their classes to be used in a future semester, as well as cross-list their reserve items if they wish to use the same materials for other courses they are teaching.
- Any type of file format can be accessed, e.g., PDF, Word, Excel, JPEG, PowerPoint, etc., as well as short video or audio clips.
- For even more freedom, a reserve item can be created using a free text file if, for example, the faculty member wishes to announce an upcoming exam or send out other important information.
- Ares provides alerts via e-mail or RSS feeds to students to notify them when new materials have been added to their course.
- Each course contains Messageboard and Chat features where the class will have the opportunity to communicate among themselves in a way similar to electronic course management systems.
- Ares helps the Libraries’ staff keep track of copyright clearance of every item. Direct links to the Copyright Clearance Center from the staff client makes it easy to secure copyright permission for electronic reserves.
- A hot list feature allows students to add their favorite reserve materials to their personal menus. In addition, the system also has an indicator to let students know whether an item has been previously viewed.

Although the new system has been in place for only a semester, there were 2191 registered users within the first weeks of the Fall term including 179 instructors who reserved 1225 items for 191 classes. As the bugs are worked out, and more faculty become aware of the many benefits of Ares, usage at both ends is expected to triple or quadruple since on demand access from anyone with computer access saves the time of all who are involved in the University’s educational mission. And, of course, who wants to dash across a snowy, cold campus to the library in the middle of the night, in the winter, in Michigan. For further information, go to http://www.wmich.edu/library/reserves.

The more that you read,
The more things you will know.
The more that you learn,
The more places you’ll go.

—Dr. Seuss