

# Wisconsin Public Library Consortium E-Book Project: Final Report

## Executive Summary

The Wisconsin Public Library Consortium (WPLC) was established in 2000 to pursue an investigation and evaluation of ebook technologies in libraries, and their acceptance by the public. At the time the grant proposal was written, the popular and library press was filled with articles about the new e-book technologies and, before making large investments in these areas, public libraries needed information about their feasibility and acceptance.

Using WATF and matching funds, the WPLC purchased a shared collection of 4,138 netLibrary electronic books on a variety of subjects. Members of the public who have established netLibrary accounts may use this collection from inside the library, or from home, school or work. In addition, approximately 4,000 Gutenberg public domain titles are also included in the netLibrary collection. Statistics show 30,772 uses of the shared collection (not including the Gutenberg titles) by the end of the grant. To put that in context, in 2001 the number of book and serial volumes owned by public libraries statewide was 20,739,451 and they circulated 50,091,828 times for an average number of circulations per item of 2.41. The WPLC collection, in contrast, had a ratio of 7.4 “uses” or circulations per title, just over three times the rate of collection turnover for the statewide traditional collections.

The Executive Summary of the evaluation of the netLibrary collection concludes that “the overall perception of netLibrary among WPLC users is positive. People view netLibrary as a valuable resource. NetLibrary’s potential seems to have generated goodwill with users regardless of age or computer expertise, but two concerns consistently emerged that influenced this goodwill: The usability of the website and the size of the collection. In addition, a lack of promotion for netLibrary was also a consistent, albeit less sizable, concern of users.

In addition to the netLibrary shared electronic book collection, some WPLC partners offered hand-held portable e-book readers to the public. Surveys were distributed with each reader checkout and a total of 207 completed surveys were received. The users of the handheld readers (mostly RCA REB 1100s) were given the opportunity to describe their experiences using the readers, to identify specific problems, features that they particularly liked and/or disliked, and to compare their preference for various book formats including the handheld e-book reader.

While nearly one-quarter of those reporting (24.15%) had some problems using the e-book readers, nevertheless, most found their experience using the readers satisfactory. In fact, over half of those trying the e-book reader ranked it either a 4 or a 5 on a five-point scale with 1 representing “least preferred format” and 5 representing “most preferred format.” While “hard-bound books” still received the highest weighted score (4.11), the e-book readers tied with “paperback books” with a rating of 3.56.

At this writing, there is considerable concern about the viability of the current generation of portable readers and the number of titles that can be loaded on them. In addition, the current model is expensive and requires specific titles to reside on specific readers, which results in a number of problems for libraries. WPLC members have concluded that while individual libraries may choose to offer this technology, the consortium will no longer invest in it. Members that offer portable readers will continue to share their experiences through the WPLC electronic list.

The WPLC partnership has proven to be a successful structure for the provision and evaluation of ebook technologies and will continue beyond the grant period. Partners have decided to invest jointly in the expansion of the shared netLibrary collection, end-user research and in projects to study other library technologies. Some of these additional studies are already underway. Membership in the consortium has proven popular and the WPLC has firm plans to continue to investigate joint library projects. During the grant period, the WPLC has grown to encompass most of the public libraries in Wisconsin and is now working out details for participation of schools. It is also discussing a plan to merge its electronic book collection with the Wisconsin Academic Consortium.