

TRAINING ON EBOOK PUBLISHING AMONG UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN NIGERIA: A COVID-19 ERA INTERVENTION.

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Abstract

One of the mandates of University teaching in Nigeria is publication of research findings. Promotion depends on such publications. University teachers often achieve this demand through peer-reviewed conference papers. At the onset of Covid-19 lockdown in Nigeria, restriction on gatherings affected in-person conferences and created a problem for many who needed to meet the demands for promotion. As beneficiaries of online trainings, we decided to provide an intervention in the form of a 5-day technology-enhanced workshop on eBook creation and publishing, which took place in March and June 2021. Using WhatsApp platform and an invite link, 109 lectures participated in the training through interactive sessions and video recordings using Screencast-O-Matic. The training experience was exhilarating for us as trainers and rewarding for the participants. About 50% of them successfully created their Kdp accounts and through the skills acquired, published their first eBook on Amazon. Such publications could be used for promotion purposes. A good number of the successful ones progressed to the level where they obtained certificates as Master eBook creators.

Method

This is a qualitative research where the report of outcome of the training is in what participants say. Krathwohl (1993) sees qualitative research as a study which provides description of a case, a group, a situation or an event. The description is in words, picturing not only what happened but also qualifying the description with adjectives and adverbs to portray it more clearly (p.29)

Introduction

One of the mandates of University teaching in Nigeria is publication of research findings. Promotions are based on knowledge generation through research and dissemination of same through peer-reviewed publications. Thus, 'Publish or perish' is a popular slogan among University academic staff. This view has become entrenched as a reminder of the fact that no matter how well a staff teaches or is involved in other activities; publication is a major component of the criteria for upward mobility in the career path. Different Universities have their criteria for promotion but the issue of publications as a major component of the requirements cuts across all Universities. For instance, in University of Calabar, the condition of service stipulates thus: consideration of academic staff for promotion will be based on their contribution to the advancement of knowledge and their service to the University. Emphasis shall be on quality of contribution and such publications are grouped under nine (9) categories for purposes of assigning assessment scores. The first category is a book published by a reputable publisher (8 points). For an edited book the editor earns 50% of the scorable points while a chapter in a book earns 2 points. Articles in impact factor (reputable) journals attract 4 points. On the other hand, refereed conference proceedings from professional bodies attract 2 points (University of Calabar, 2014).

Though book publication attracts the highest points, it is only accepted for promotion to the rank of Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Full Professor. Thus at lower ranks staff depend mainly on published journal papers. It is succinctly put this way, "there should be evidence of contribution to knowledge in the form of scholarly publications in reputable journals or other recognized media for the dissemination of the results of original research. Account may also be taken of published papers presented at conferences of Learned Societies" (p.18). For instance, if the effective promotion month is October, only publications earlier than October of that year are considered.

However at the onset of the lockdown occasioned by Covid-19 pandemic, many restrictions were placed on physical contacts and gatherings. In-person conferences were put on hold more so when travelling was banned. This was the dilemma academic staff that needed to meet the requirements for promotion at stipulated months of the year, found themselves. Hence there was great need to assist University lecturers find alternative outlets for publications. The

most viable option was virtual publications. However the level of readiness for online participation has been low among lecturers (Asim, 2007). Perhaps that explains why University students even have their own concerns about virtual assessment by their lecturers (Asim & Idika, 2011). As important as virtual teaching and learning are, skill gaps still exist (Asim & Kebbi, 2013). We are in the era of knowledge economy so the teacher's task has to change with the times (Asim, 2013). Thus if University teachers are to be assisted to upgrade their online skills and publish their research outputs and books online, then this has to be in a non-threatening manner. Knowledge economy is technology-driven (Asim, 2017) and for the teachers, this places emphasis on blended learning as opposed to chalk-talk lesson presentation which many teachers are conversant with. Thus there was need to bridge University lecturers' technology skills gap in an innovative way.

According to Inyang-Abia (2021), one key characteristic of technology is mobility. He stated that with increasing human mobility through the internet, technology mobility becomes increasingly accelerated with greater penetrating effect. Thus it could be argued that the creative use of technology in research output dissemination is capable of also improving lecturers' capacity and making their teaching more effective and efficient. Having benefitted from Virtual Institute for Higher Education Pedagogy (VIHEP) hosted by National Universities Commission (NUC), Nigeria, as well as FutureLearn (www.futurelearn.com) which is a social learning environment and successfully completed the Master's eBook creation/publishing online programme, we decided to assist University lecturers with online publishing skills.

Objectives of the training as posted at the commencement of the training workshop are as stated:

At the end of the training, participants should be able to:

1. define strong writing.
2. enumerate at least 5 benefits of strong writing.
3. identify eight rules of strong writing.
4. explain what purposeful writing means.
5. identify key features of a bestselling book.
6. differentiate between an eBook and a paperback.
7. format an eBook using Microsoft Word and a customized template.
8. create a Kindle direct publishing (Kdp) account.
9. download and install the kindle application software in their laptop or desktop computer.
10. format a manuscript into an eBook for publishing.
11. publish an e-book compiled from the training notes on Kdp Amazon platform.

Course outline for the training

- Welcome and self-introduction.
- What is Strong writing?
- What is purposeful writing?
- Tips on becoming a bestseller.
- Introduction to eBook
- Introduction to Formatting
 - i) Formatting manuscript into eBook using Microsoft Word.
 - ii) Formatting manuscript into eBook using customized template.
- How to create a Kdp account.
- How to download and install Kindle Create Application software
 - i) Using the Kindle Create Application software to format a manuscript into an eBook.
- Step by step method of publishing a formatted manuscript on the Kdp Amazon platform.

Training Approach

Blended learning approach was used. Here a combination of online teaching using audio and video recordings on Screencast-O-Matic. Some participants in our locality had the opportunity to meet the trainers face - to - face, when they had challenges. The choice of Screencast-O-Matic was premised on the fact that it suited our need for versatility and easy video communication. Educators and students turn to Screencast-O-Matic for easy video communication. Videos are used for flipped/blended learning, Video Massaging, student assignments, feedback and more (<http://creencast-o-matic.com/education>).

With Screencast-O-Matic, we were able to produce pre-recorded videos for presentation. Thus, participants were able to watch practical demonstrations of various activities during the training. The additional advantage was that they could play the videos as often as they required, which made the training easy for us as facilitators and beneficial to the participants. According to Bruner (2001), one of the biggest mistakes is to forego the repetition. For him, repetition matters because it can hasten and deepen the engagement process. If one cares about quality of learning, one should consciously design repetitive engagement into courses and daily learning. For us, a better way to produce the needed repetition was to include videos for the participants. Moreover, videos produced for the March 2021 training, were also used for subsequent trainings.

Course Materials

For this training, we used text, audio recordings (voice notes), as well as video recordings using Screen-Cast-O-Matic application. In all, 16 video recordings were used for the training. The intention was for participants to read, hear, observe, and act on whatever was presented.

Training evaluation

- i. Attendance
- ii. Participation
- iii. Published eBook from lecture notes.

Commencement of training

Before the commencement of the training we created a WhatsApp group with the title: **E-publishing Training**. Thereafter, WhatsApp group invites were sent to people who voluntarily joined the group. The 5-day virtual training was from 16th to the 20th of March, 2021, from 7pm - 9pm each day, on the WhatsApp platform. 56 participants took part in the March 2021 training, while 53 participants took part in May training. The training was in two parts: the theory and practical aspects. After every presentation, participants were given opportunity to share their experiences, what they have learnt, ask questions, submit assignments etc, on the platform in real time. They also practiced what they were taught in the theory class, making the training highly interactive.

Day 1

Activity 1: Introduction of participants using a prescribed format.

Activity 2: Introduction to ‘strong’ and ‘purposeful’ writing. In this activity participants were introduced to the qualities of a strong and purposeful writing. Why strong writing must be compelling, impactful, simple and clear to understand and also deliver the message intended. For the writing to be purposeful the writer has to stick to the goal or purpose of writing so as to satisfy the reader’s expectations.

Activity 3: Writing a bestseller: Participants had the opportunity to learn some tips that will make their book a bestseller. It was expected that not only will participants be able to self-publish their academic books or journals online for promotion purposes, but acquire skills that will enable them publish in different genres.

End of activities assignments: At the end of **Activity 1**, participants were given opportunity to evaluate what they had learnt so far. Some of their views are shared below:

“Thank you very much Prof for this opportunity. I have gained a lot of knowledge and clarifications on how to write successfully.”

Another participant posted as follows:

“As a writer I have oftentimes concentrated on the accuracy of grammar believing it expresses how much I am grounded in the language to the detriment of the content. What I have learned from this class is a wonderful eye opener. If I intend to make money and more of it, I should be careful with content. Prof. Samae!”

Participants were also asked two questions:

Question 1: In your own words tell us what you understand by strong and purposeful writing. The answer to this question was posted on the platform in real time. Some answers by the participants are given below:

“Strong writing should be focused and goal oriented. That is what is required in today’s competitive world to trigger and sustain reading interest.”

Another participant posted thus:

“Strong writing and purposeful writing gives a strong book, a book which is referred to as a bestseller! I just learnt this today! Thanks for today’s training Prof. God bless you.”

Question 2: As a writer, when do you think writing should stop? Some answers posted that were posted on the platform are given below:

“Writing should stop when the writer finds writing harder than normal. That is when creativity stalls and the project is getting nowhere, especially in fleshing characters and you can’t make the plot to make sense. It is advisable to stop at this point.”

Another participant posted thus:

“Writing a book should stop when one runs out of ideas that will be beneficial to readers or when there is a lack of focus and the ability to set realistic goals.”

Day 2

Activity 1: Participants were introduced to eBook, the basic requirements or industry standards for an eBook, and how to format an eBook.

Activity 2: Formatting an eBook

Participants were taught the following:

- meaning of formatting.
- the importance of formatting.
- the difference between template and formatting.
- the various parts of the layout of a document on the page or template to be formatted, such as fonts size and type - (bold or italics) margin, spacing, alignment, indentation, pagination, columns, background etc.

Activity 3: Participants were introduced to some practical steps in formatting. They watched two separate videos showing how to format a document in Microsoft Word and Customized (already formatted) template:

A. Formatting in Microsoft Word

In this video participants were taught how to:

- a. set the size of the document to meet acceptable industry standards for an eBook.
- b. set the page and margins.
- c. choose suitable style and customize as may be required.
- d. format the interior of a book - preliminaries, dedication, acknowledgement, chapters, etc,
- e. generate a cover design.
- f. insert additional pages, where necessary.
- g. insert Headers and Footers if required .
- h. generate Table of Contents (ToC) .
- i. edit and proofread their manuscript, and the benefits of doing so.
- j. convert their documents into pdf format for publishing.

B. Customized (already formatted) Template

The video presentation took participants through on how to:

- a. copy the customized template into the computer, tablet or mobile phone.
- b. open the already formatted template in Microsoft Word.
- c. copy a document (manuscript) to the template, starting from the preliminaries, title page, author's name, ISBN, then each chapter of the book (one item at a time).
- d. change contents of the already customized template - font size, spacing, font colour, etc.
- e. add items or edit the table of contents etc.

Activity 3: Take home assignment - At the end of the presentations, participants were given take home assignments. Answers were expected to be posted on the platform the next day.

Assignment No 1: What is an eBook?

Assignment No 2: What is the difference between template and formatting?

Day 3.

Activity 1: The platform was opened and to ensure that participants were serious over the training as we were, we asked those who had joined to indicate their presence by typing 'Yes'. Many responded.

Activity 2: We requested that answers to take home assignments be posted on the platform. Some answers to the take home Assignment No 1 given on Day 2 are shown below:

"An eBook is an electronic version of a printed book that can be read on a computer or specifically designed handheld device."

Another participant posted thus:

"An eBook is a book publication available in digital form. It is readable on electronic devices such as tablets, mobile phones and computers."

Also, some answers to the take home Assignment No 2 given on Day 2 are shown below:

"A template is a format or blueprint upon which other objects or documents could be developed from. Whereas formatting is the art of creating an acceptable document taking into cognizance the font, borders, margins etc."

Another participant posted thus:

"A template is a design that other documents can be developed from. Formatting is the art of designing a document taking into consideration the font size and font type, borders, line spacing and margin."

Activity 3

Activity 3.1: How to create a Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) account. This practical session was one of the most crucial aspects of this training. A text and video presentations demonstrated a step by step procedure for creating a Kdp account. Most of the participants were able to create their Kdp account after watching the video. We guided those who could not until they were able to do so.

Why create a KDP account. Participants were made to understand that without a Kdp account one cannot publish on the Kdp Amazon website nor enjoy the benefits Kdp offers to publishers. For example, "KDP allows you to self-publish your eBooks, paperbacks, and hardcover books for free. We give you direct access to your book on Amazon, and allow you to create a product detail page for your book." (Kdp Publishing, Help Topics) Besides, most of the participants know what it takes to publish a book in the traditional method of publishing. We used a pictorial presentation to demonstrate the difference between the traditional way of publishing and publishing digitally on

KDP, including some of the benefits Kdp offers to publishers at no cost to them. A pictorial presentation of the difference between analogue and digital methods of publishing is shown in figure 1.

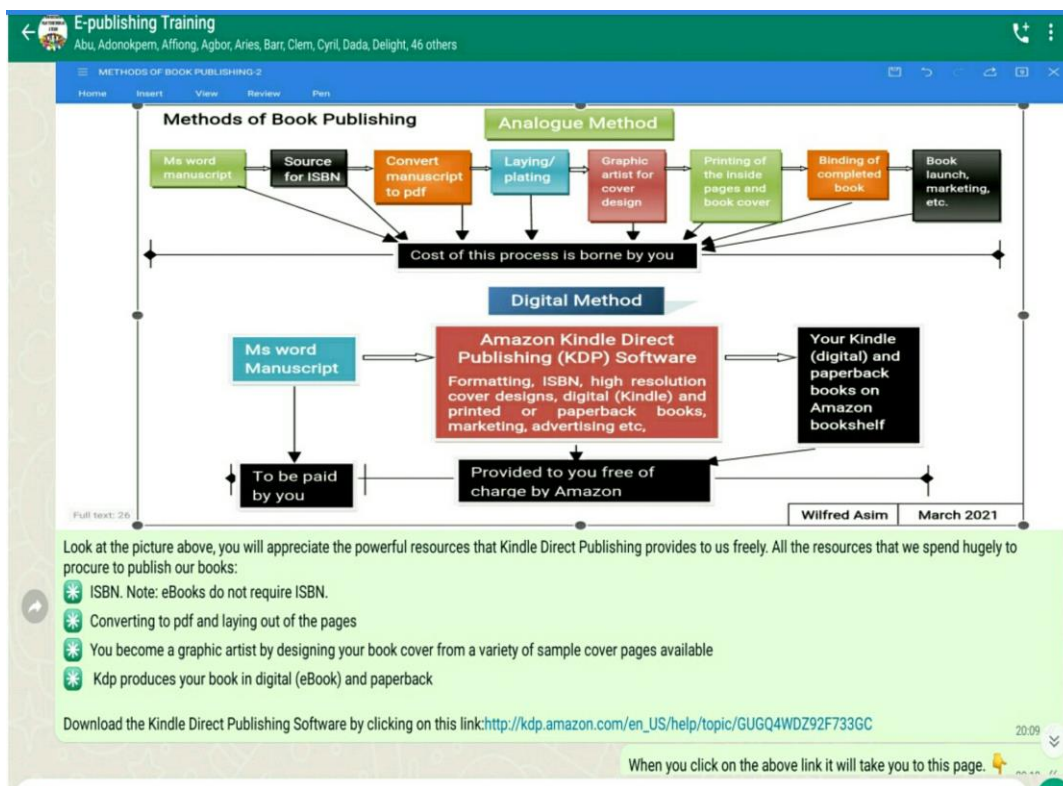


Figure 1: Screenshot of the difference between analogue and digital methods of publishing.
Source: Asim & Asim (2021)

After the pictorial presentation, participants were most appreciative of the opportunity the training offered to them. Those who were at the verge of discouragement were motivated and put in more efforts to succeed.

Activity 3.2: How to download and install the Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) Software - This practical session introduced participants to how they can download and install the KDP application software on their laptop or desktop computers. This activity was a crucial requirement for publishing on the Amazon platform. Without the KDP software, it is impossible to format a manuscript to meet Kindle specification. Therefore, we spent much time in helping participants by: 1) text presentation, and 2) video presentation, which made it easy for participants to download and install the software without much stress.

Day 4

Activity 1: How to format eBook using the Kdp application software. Participants had a hands-on experience during this activity too. The video presentation showed how to:

- a) import Word documents into the Kdp application software,
- b) use available formatting options:
 - i. Front Matter, Body, Back Matter,
 - ii. Text properties such as indents, fonts, bold, Drop Cap, paragraphs etc.
 - iii. Elements such as Chapter Subtitle, Chapter First Paragraph etc.
 - iv. Themes, Preview, Save, Generate options etc.

At the end of the presentation we encouraged participants to format their manuscript produced from the training materials using the kdp software, and report whatever challenges they may encounter. Many were able to do it without our assistance.

Day 5

Activity 1 - Publishing a formatted manuscript on the Kdp Amazon platform. Three separate video presentations were used in this activity. The first video showed participants how to:

Complete 'Kindle eBook Details' Stage 1

- a. enter eBook detail - language, book title, sub title, author's name, description - (helps people to know about the contents of a book), publishing rights, category, ISBN, keywords - for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), Category etc.
- b. upload the eBook manuscript file from the hard disk drive to Kdp.

The second video showed participant how to:

Complete 'Kindle eBook Content' Stage 2

- a. launch 'The Reviewer' option to display content and layout of the book in pdf format.
- b. use the 'Cover Creation Tools' in Kdp to create beautiful cover pages for a book.

The third video showed participant how to:

Complete 'Kindle eBook Pricing' Stage 3

- a. select royalty plan as may be desired – 30% or 70%
- b. select pricing - price range shown in the price window between the 'Minimum' and 'Maximum' prices.
- c. select 'Publish Your Kindle eBook' to publish and wait for the message 'Done!'

Conclusion and recommendation

The 5-day free training which took place in March and May 2021 on eBook publishing ended with some of them publishing their kindle eBooks on the Amazon platform and posting their published and priced book on the training platform. This outcome was a testimony of the utility of the training intervention. About half the number of the participants progressed to the Masters Class. Some have obtained the Masters certificate in eBook publishing as we had done. A follow-up on our participants revealed that the skills have been useful and they have also trained others. This success is exhilarating for us as trainers, and we believe that the multiplier effect of the training will improve lecturers' blended learning teaching skills beyond the original intention of online publication of their research findings. We recommend that a peer review of such eBooks should be incorporated into the promotion guidelines of Universities for academic staff promotion.

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