

# How do student practitioners use online resources?

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*A performing arts perspective*

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## Introduction

Over the past five years, the publishing landscape in the performing arts has been slowly changing. Dramatic publishers, marketing to an audience outside the realm of academia, have been developing their own online resources for theatre practitioners to access content. Primarily consisting of text and streaming video content, these new resources build on existing academic resources for studying the performing arts, but are marketed explicitly to schools and practitioners.

Over the same five years, teaching and learning styles at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) have increasingly emphasised online learning and engagement with screen and digital media. This is being practiced alongside, and interconnected with, traditional conservatoire-style theatre training.

Numerous studies have looked at the information seeking behaviour and needs of theatre artists and students, and how it can differ from research and study in academia. In this context, we at the Rodney Seaborn Library at NIDA wanted to know more about what our students were doing with online resources. For students who spend so much of their time being taught in tactile, embodied ways in the studio, how do they feel about using online resources, and are online resources meeting their creative needs?

We conducted a survey this year as a quick way of gathering feedback from students about their use of online resources – in particular, the specialist performing arts resources that have been developed over the past five years.

What we discovered was not just a glimpse into the ways students feel about using these resources. Our project led us to think beyond specific resources and to a recurring question for arts libraries – are we meeting all the creative and academic information needs that our students have in a rapidly evolving industry?

In this presentation, we'll give you an overview of the changes that have been occurring at NIDA and in the Library. We'll then focus on one particular online resource – Bloomsbury's Drama Online.

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## Overview of changes at NIDA since 2010

The Rodney Seaborn Library at NIDA was created in 1980 by Christine Roberts. Over the years the library developed a highly specialised print repository of playscripts and texts relating to NIDA's core courses – namely theatre making, performance design, and live production. The library expanded over the decades with very little change to its collection development policy. Similarly, teaching methods at NIDA remained much the same in the early 2000s as they had in 1980 – hands-on, embodied conservatoire-style training, with little considered engagement with online resources or teaching.

Over the past five years, however, the culture at NIDA has changed. We've seen our courses reaccredited from Bachelors and Masters of Dramatic Arts to Bachelors and Masters of Fine Arts. An online learning management system, Moodle, was introduced in 2012. Students are expected to engage with screen and digital media in more extensive ways. And this year we started delivering our first distance education course, an MFA in Cultural Leadership.

In terms of library resources, we've seen changes as well. In 2010 there were very few specialist online resources that catered to performing arts teachers and practitioners, aside from indexes offered by Proquest & EBSCO, and the video collections from Alexander Street Press. Since then, we've seen a number of online resources developed by publishers with performing arts student-practitioners in mind. From the UK, Drama Online, Digital Theatre Plus, and the Routledge Performance Archive have been released by publishers. In Australia, the Australian Script Centre opened up their online shopfront, AustralianPlays.org, to organisations in 2009.

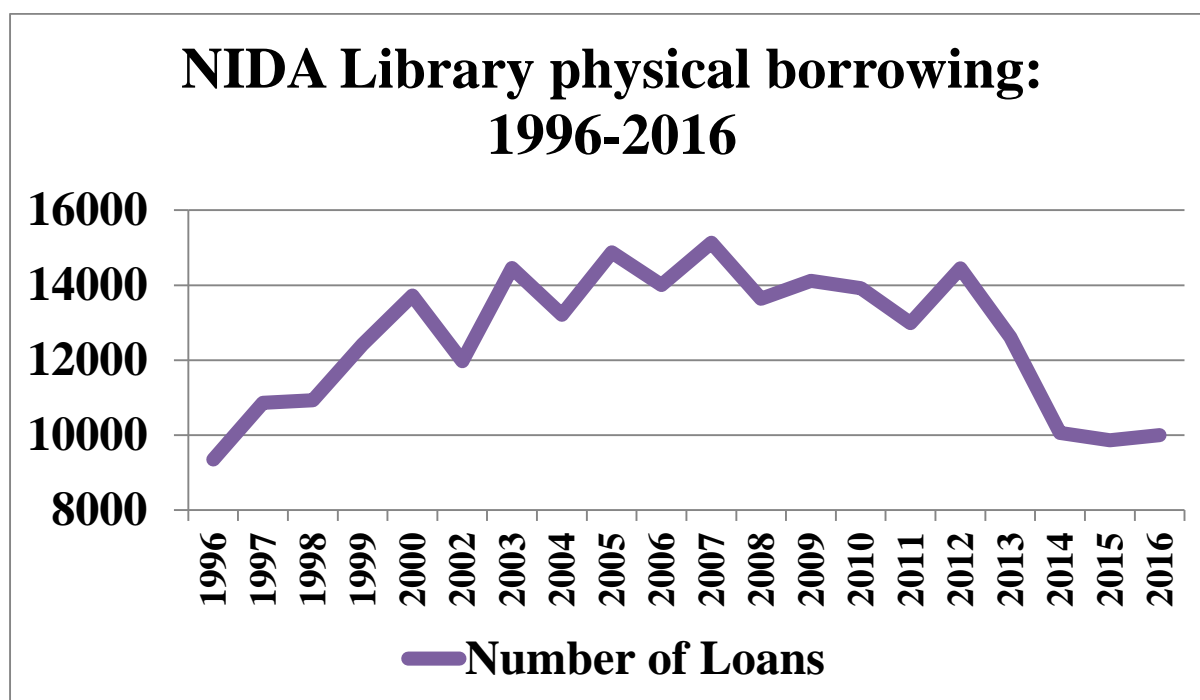
Most of these are textual and streaming video-based. The best design and image related resources within the performing arts tend to still be digitised archive collections, scattered worldwide.

Of these resources, Drama Online and Digital Theatre Plus are both collaborations between specialist dramatic publishers or commercial theatre groups in the UK. These are explicitly marketed as teaching resources, rather than just research or academic resources. Australianplays.org, originally a shopfront for theatre practitioners, has also marketed itself more explicitly as a resource for schools since 2009. As a practice-based conservatoire, we've found these resources complement our print collection very well.

As we've added these resources to our collection we've transformed from a predominantly print-based collection to a hybrid collection. This has changed how students use the collection – they're borrowing less print, and using more online resources as time goes on.

## Circulation statistics

Firstly, let's take a look at our physical borrowing over the past 20 years, all the way back through to 1996:



*NIDA Library Circulation Statistics: Print book loans*

Some context for these statistics:

- From 1996 to 2000 we grew our print collection rapidly and increased borrowing thresholds, hence the steep rise at the beginning of the chart.
- The highest level of physical borrowing occurred from about 2003 through to 2007, with a late peak in 2012.
- The drop after 2012 is sudden, albeit with an upswing in 2016 as NIDA enrolled more students in more courses this year.

We looked at these statistics over the past few years and asked ourselves: what could have caused physical borrowing to drop so sharply? We thought that decline was hopefully being replaced by online resources.

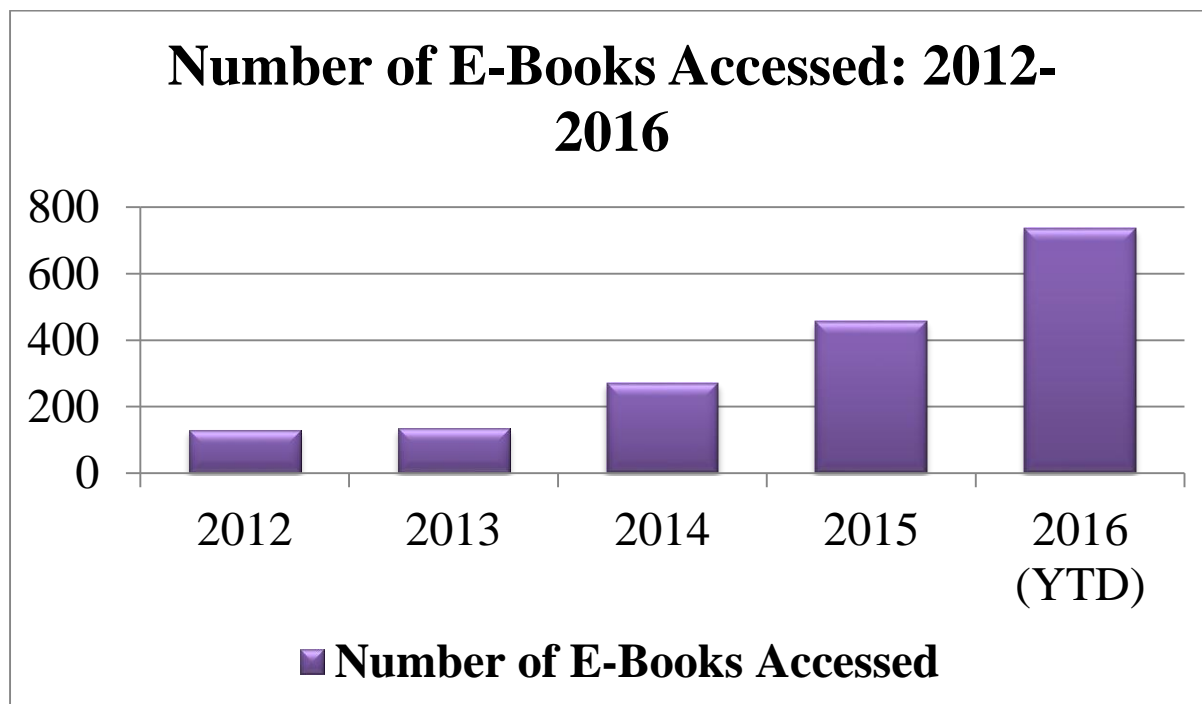
Following this hunch, we looked over our e-book access rates as a subsection of online library resource usage.

E-books were added to the collection from 2011. Our one provider, then and now, is EBL/Proquest. We brought in e-books:

1. To align the library's collection development with the organisation's ongoing business plan
2. To complement our physical collection of scholarly texts and plays through an online platform.

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Initially, e-books were not used very often. The sign in process was cumbersome and the selection of books was limited. In 2014 we migrated to a new ILS which allowed us to simplify the sign-on process, and this development is reflected in these usage statistics.



*NIDA Library Circulation Statistics: E-Books accessed 2012-2016*

Some context for these statistics:

- 2016 is an estimated projection judging from trends through to October.
- There was a discernible jump in 2015 and 2016 which correlates to our new 'e-book friendly' sign-in system.
- The content range also increased from 2015, with specialist publishers Oberon Books and Currency Plays making more content available.

The increase in e-book use correlates to the increase in online teaching, and the introduction of specialist online resources from the library. These e-book statistics are only one part of the online landscape at NIDA, but we can see that online resource usage is changing the way students are using the library.

## Survey

We undertook a survey in August 2016 to learn more about how students felt about using online resources, particularly Drama Online as it is our largest and most diverse specialist resource in terms of content.

The online survey ran for six weeks and we had 87 respondents – 14 responses were from teaching staff and 73 from students (out of a cohort of 260 students across all higher education courses). Out of the students, the largest group of students were actors. This reflects library usage – our most active users are acting students.

As an aside: we recognise the limitations of surveys, in particular their limited ability to return deep qualitative results, and the risk of having a skewed sample size. NIDA is slowly developing a research culture, so a survey was the most efficient way for us to conduct any research this year. The results have helped us identify areas for further qualitative research.

## Drama Online

From the [Drama Online website](#):

*“The award-winning Drama Online introduces new writers alongside the most iconic names in playwriting history, providing contextual and critical background through scholarly works and practical guides.*

*Our constantly growing collection meets the full range of teaching needs for theatre studies, literature courses and drama schools. From the epic to the monologue; ensemble to one-person plays; comedy to tragedy; the historical to the contemporary; and from the highly political to the profoundly personal, there is plenty to discover.*

*Our unique Play Tools with Character Grids, Words and Speech graphs and Part Books offer a new way to engage with plays for close study or for performance.”*

Drama Online draws content together from UK dramatic publishers to provide a comprehensive teaching resource for schools. It has discoverability features that library catalogues don't have: Play Tools, searching by genre & time period, and monologue searching. Drama Online went live in mid-2013 and since then, the database has increased its content four-fold. Through Drama Online students at NIDA have access to about 1,800 playscripts, 250 streaming audio and video titles, and over 100 scholarly texts published by Bloomsbury.

We ran an earlier survey in 2013 relating to online services. One question asked in both the 2013 and 2016 surveys was ‘Have you used Drama Online?’, and the results are very close to being identical:

Have you used Drama Online?	Yes	No
2013	60.3%	39.7%
2016	61.3%	38.7%

*NIDA Library 2013 & 2016 Survey Results: [Q: Have you used Drama Online?]*

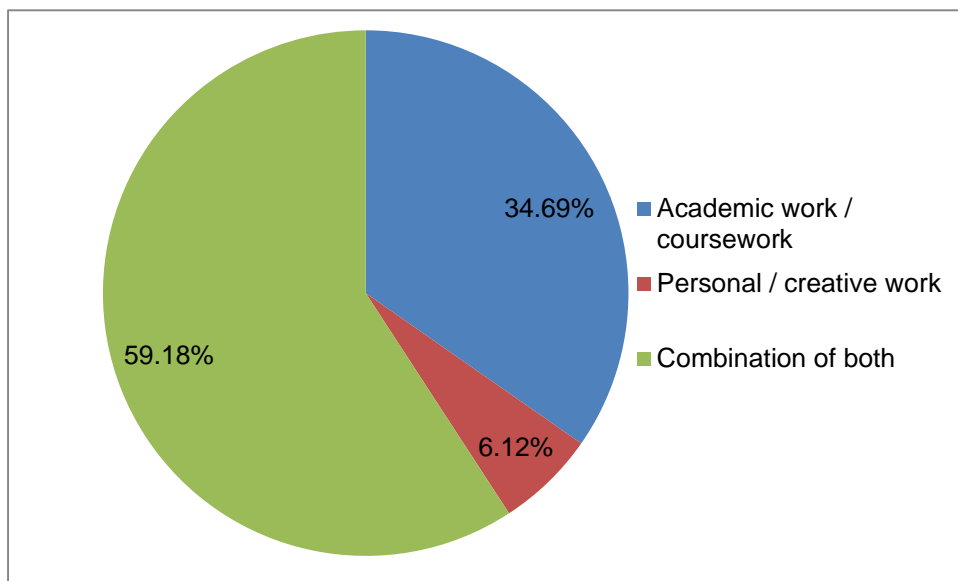
Proportionally, despite the legacy of three years of access, improvements, and a vaster content base, usage levels of Drama Online throughout NIDA have barely changed. The figures suggest that there will always be a percentage of NIDA students and teachers who will not or cannot apply themselves to using online databases.

We used the survey to try and examine the scope of Drama Online usage. In this survey, we asked students and teachers to think about both their academic work (i.e. coursework, academic writing) and their personal creative work (finding their own textual material to support theatre and object making, productions, rehearsals). We also asked them specifically about Drama Online in more detail to find out:

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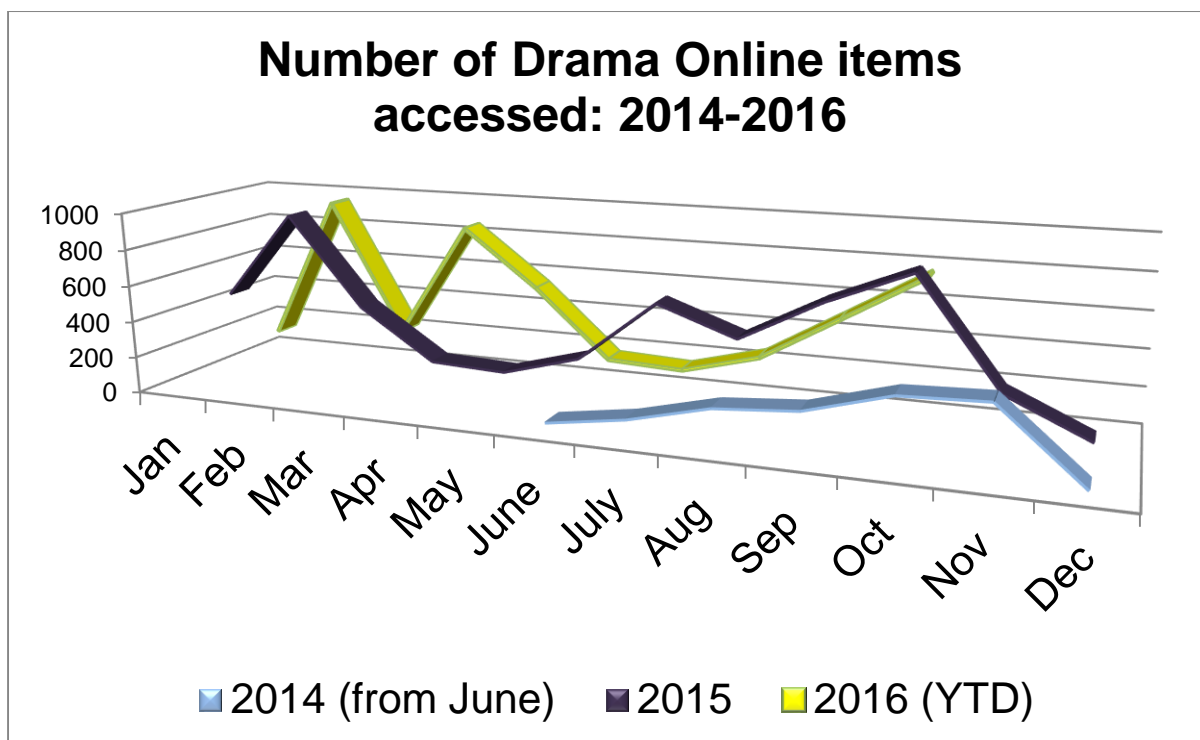
1. How and when are students using Drama Online?
2. What are they using in Drama Online?
3. What do they think about Drama Online, and online reading in general?

### How & when are NIDA students using Drama Online Library?



*NIDA Library 2016 Survey Q11: [What work do you use Drama Online for?]*

Just over half of students say they use Drama Online for both academic and creative work. In their opinion, students are using Drama Online to find material related to their essay writing and tutorials, as well as their own material to rehearse, perform and create from. Of course, the nature of study at NIDA is that assessed coursework often involves creative work and not just academic reading and writing.



NIDA Library Drama Online Usage Statistics 2014-2016

Additionally, the usage statistics provided by Drama Online over 2014 – 2016 show that the busiest times for Drama Online correlate to times of the year when we know students are completing essays or play analysis in class. We would consider this academic work – the play has been set by a teacher for the students to read.

We also see that usage rises during times of the year when we know our acting students are looking for scenes and monologues, which we would consider creative work – students finding their own material to rehearse and perform. This generally happens around September and October, when third year Acting students are finding material for their Graduate Showcase in November.

Looking at some of the popular texts accessed during this time supports this correlation:

- Feb 2016:
  - Oedipus plays (148 views this month), all first year undergraduates - *Coursework*.
  - Don Juan (67 views this month) & Coriolanus (52 views this month) related to special Design projects with set texts – *Coursework*.
- Feb 2015:
  - Punk Rock (258) – Punk Rock’s high usage numbers in both February 2015 and 2016 are because it was used as a sample text in library orientations.
  - Oedipus (64) – *Coursework*.
- Oct 2015 –
  - Punk Rock, Shopping & f’ing, David Hare Plays 3 – *Creative/personal* in the sense of searching for scenes and monologues. (September/October is the yearly high point for monologues and scene searching at NIDA due to graduate showcases). These playwrights are popular across all our collections and especially with acting students.



- Apr 2016 –
  - Plenty (60), The Rivals (43), both plays found on reading lists for this period – *Coursework*.
- Oct 2016 –
  - The Sugar Syndrome / Prebble and Drunk Enough to Say I Love You? / Churchill were the highest viewed plays this month – neither have been set by teachers, but both writers are popular with actors searching for scenes for their graduate showcase.

We infer from these usage statistics and our knowledge of the NIDA academic year cycle that Drama Online is helping to meet certain academic and creative points of need amongst our students.

### What are they using in Drama Online?

Punk Rock / Simon Stephens	567
Love and Information / Caryl Churchill	268
Pornography / Simon Stephens	236
Oedipus Plays	226
David Hare Plays 3	215
Top Girls	187
Spring Awakening	185
Morning / Simon Stephens	172
Shopping And F***ing / Mark Ravenhill	164
Churchill Plays: 1	139
On The Shore Of The Wide World / Simon Stephens	139
13 / Mike Bartlett	127
American Next Wave	96
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time	92
Plenty / David Hare	89
Harold Pinter: Plays 4	88
Stephens Plays: 2	88
David Hare Plays 2	87
Mamet Plays: 2	80

Stephens Plays: 1	79
Moira Buffini Plays 1	78
Polar Bears / Mark Haddon	76
Ravenhill Plays: 2	76
That Face / Polly Stenham	73
'Wastwater' and 'T5' / Simon Stephens	72
A Midsummer Night's Dream / Shakespeare	71
When the Rain Stops Falling / Andrew Bovell	71
Shopping and Fucking by Mark Ravenhill (from: Shopping And F****ing)	69

*NIDA Library: Most popular Drama Online playscripts by views (from mid-2014 to mid-2016)*

The top 30 list of playscripts accessed by NIDA users since 2014 suggests a mixture of academic/coursework and creative/personal work, with perennially popular scripts and writers featuring quite strongly in this list.

- Simon Stephens and Caryl Churchill feature heavily, and are two of our most popular writers amongst our borrowers. Similarly are Mark Ravenhill, David Mamet, David Hare, Harold Pinter.
- Popular singular texts on Drama Online also include: *Polar Bears*, *That Face*, *When the Rain stops falling*, 13, which are popular physical texts that get borrowed frequently by actors in particular.
- Scripts that appear on undergraduate reading lists include: Oedipus Plays, Harold Pinter 4, Midsummer Night's Dream, Don Juan, Woyzeck.

Twelfth Night	Globe on Screen	213
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Globe on Screen	122
Hamlet (Maxine Peake as Hamlet)	Genesius Pictures	102
Shakespeare in the Present	Patsy Rodenburg	51
Othello	Globe on Screen	29
Macbeth	LA Theatre Works	25
The Rivals	LA Theatre Works	24
reasons to be pretty	LA Theatre Works	23
Romeo and Juliet	Globe on Screen	22
Shakespeare in the Present	Patsy Rodenburg	19
Henry IV, Part 2	Globe on Screen	19
As You Like It	Globe on Screen	14
Macbeth	Globe on Screen	12
All's Well That Ends Well	Globe on Screen	15
The Tempest	Globe on Screen	10
Oedipus the King	LA Theatre Works	10

*NIDA Library: Most popular Drama Online audiovisual resources in 2016 by views (as of August 2016)*

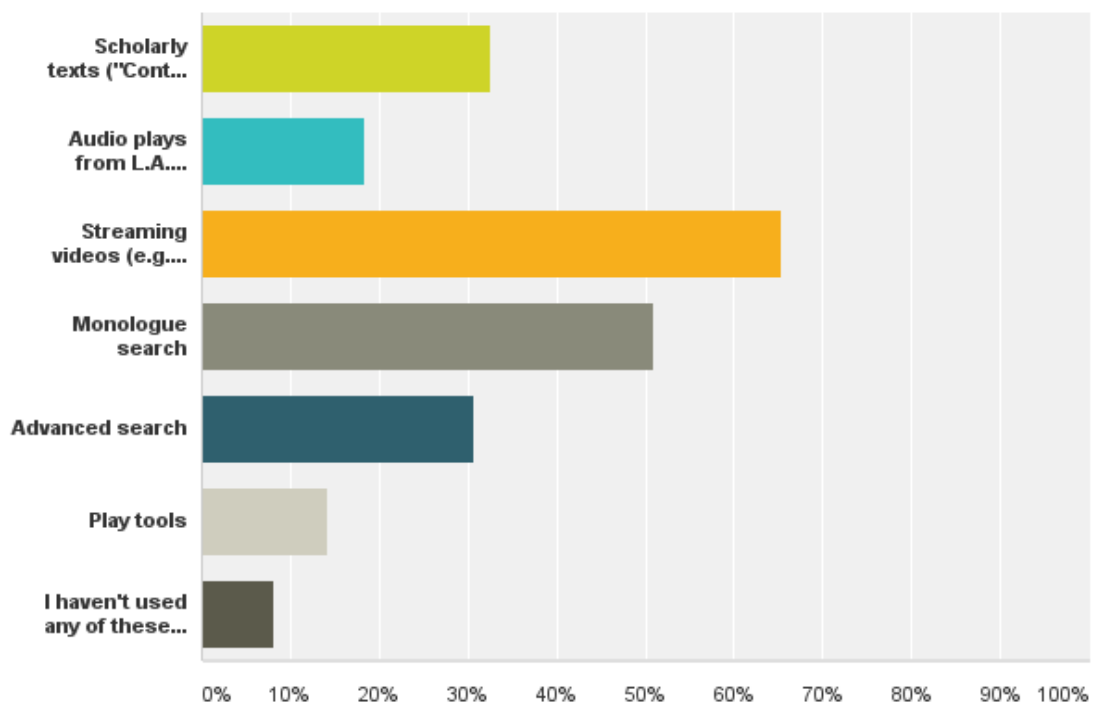
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In 2016 Drama Online incorporated streaming video and audio services into the collection. In March we advertised these resources with notices around the library, particularly the two top Shakespeare videos, as these were part of the June production season at NIDA.

These lists suggest that Drama Online is meeting academic and creative points of need for students.

### Q16 Have you used any of the following Drama Online resources? Select all that apply.

Answered: 49 Skipped: 38



NIDA Library 2016 Survey Q16: Have you used any of the following Drama Online resources?

This mixed creative and academic use was reinforced when we asked respondents what extra features they had used on Drama Online. The majority of respondents who use Drama Online said that apart from reading plays, they have used streaming video resources and monologue searching, with less using the scholarly texts and advanced search. So once students start using Drama Online they often start using the extra-textual resources and discoverability features to not just to find set readings, but to browse and discover content for themselves.

## What do student-practitioners think about Drama Online?

When we asked students for their opinion on Drama Online, we received generally positive reviews:

*I think it's a very important and helpful resource for finding rarer scripts.*

*I think it is a great tool with a lot of content that is very user friendly. The combination of videos (such as the ones from the globe) and the wide variety of texts is certainly a big plus for me.*

*It's a fantastic resource, and it makes life a lot easier for students as we're able to access a wide range of texts from home.*

*Yes it's an awesome resource and super helpful if you're learning a monologue or scene for a script you can't find elsewhere.*

*It's great! I loved having access to the Globe for my Shakespearean production.*

*It is an excellent resources. At the university I teach it, it has been an incredible resources. As a student and practitioner, it is a vast bank of useful tools and works*

*i love the LA Theatre Works Audio plays, such a great resource for dialect materials*

*We had an intro to it in first year which was great. Just a good tool to browse plays.*

Respondents in particular expressed favourable opinions about the wide range of content and formats, and accessing hard-to-find scripts.

Some responses also noted room for improvement with the usability of the site and its potential use amongst the NIDA community:

*It's quite annoying how it logs you out all the time, mid play (when at home, listening to audio.)*

*The search features are very good for very specific searches but if you are a little unsure what you are looking for you need to use other options first.*

*I sometimes find the search engine can be a little finicky.*

*I think more specific filtering options as well as broad categories would be useful as from memory it was more based of searching keywords when i would rather browse a topic of related texts. But from what ive used its a good database with a fair amount of resources*

We agree with the respondents who complained about the search features – and one of the benefits of doing this survey is that we now have some user feedback to take back to Bloomsbury.

Other responses indicated that users felt the resource wasn't being used to its full potential within NIDA:

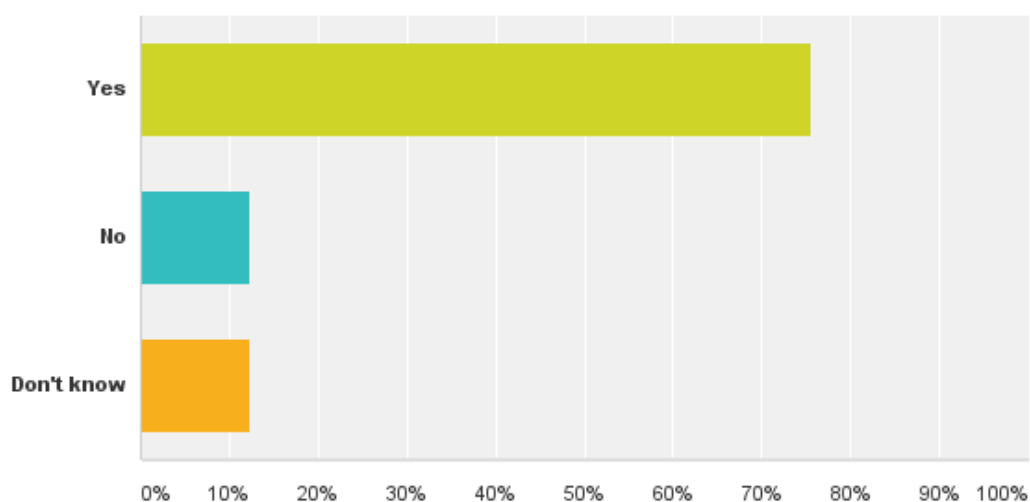
*A useful resource for our purposes, probably not used to its full potential by staff or students.*

*I think it's a valuable resource that probably has much more capacity than is being used :)*

In addition to this feedback, when asked whether they would like more guidance on how to use Drama Online, three-quarters of respondents who had already used Drama Online in the past indicated that they would like more guidance:

### **Q17 Would you find it useful to have library staff show you some or all of the feature and resources available to you via Drama Online?**

Answered: 49 Skipped: 38



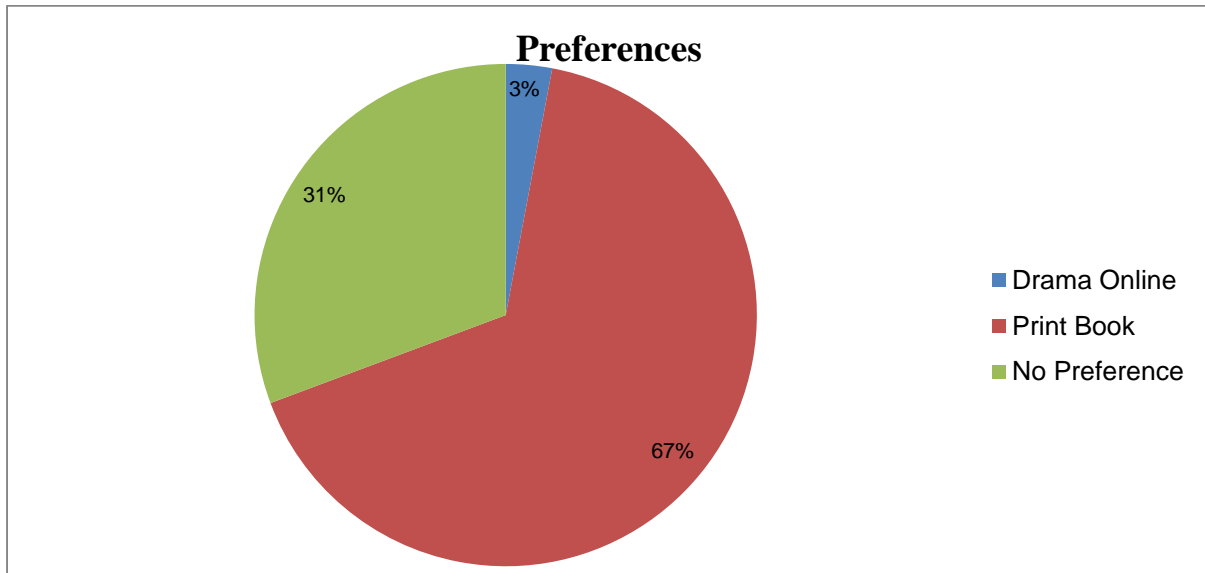
*NIDA Library 2016 Survey Q17: Would you find it useful to have library staff show you some or all of the features and resources available to you via Drama Online?*

**These results indicate a need for the Library to re-assess how we are currently promoting Drama Online and supporting our users.**

Currently, NIDA Library provides general orientation sessions to students at the beginning of their courses, and one-off training sessions by teacher request. The Library offers no information or digital literacy training to teaching staff. In this respect, we recognise that our library services haven't kept up with the changes in our library collections.

## What do student-practitioners think about online reading?

We saw in the usage statistics that print borrowing is down and use of online resources is up among NIDA Library users. What do NIDA students think about using online resources?



*NIDA Library 2016 Survey Q14: How do you prefer reading playscripts (with reference to Drama Online and print only)*

The survey found that, despite the increased use of online resources, the majority of respondents still prefer using print playscripts. A similar question to the one asked above, with reference specifically to downloadable e-books, returned similar results, with over 70% of respondents stating they preferred reading print.

Theatre practitioner and student preferences for print browsing or reading have been well documented by past studies. Studies of theatre practitioners in 2010, and performing arts students in 2013, indicated that while these users find electronic resources useful & convenient, access to print resources is still very important to them (Medaille, 2010; Clark, 2013). In these cases, the content wasn't available electronically, the print format better suited the content, or print formats were found easier at the time for browsing. A more recent study of performing arts students suggested that they have unmet multimedia needs, and that they struggle with the discovery layer and catalogue (Mayer, 2015).

These studies reflect the experience of students at NIDA. As a conservatoire-style drama school, students are taught in a practical, embodied way, and undergraduate students have wide ranges of digital and information literacy skills. They have various creative and personal reasons for using or preferring online and print formats.

When we asked them to explain their preferences, students occasionally expressed reasons related to their creative work for preferring print or electronic.

*I prefer ebooks for written/academic texts with print books for either tutorial type books (eg. Metric pattern making) or visual reference books*

*As an actor I prefer print copies for two main reasons; I am able to easily move around with a play in my hand and secondly, I prefer the feeling of turning pages. With that said, I value e-books tremendously and appreciate how i am able to have 100's of books at my fingertips located on my ipad.*

*I find it easier to work on it if it's on paper so I can work it and visualise the play in the space, especially if it's a monologue that I'm looking for*

*I find it much easier to focus on the words and shape of the play as a complete work when it's in paper form.*

*If it is a play we are researching and analysing deeply I prefer a printed copy so I can write notes. But on the other hand, online versions are handy on the bus, train etc.*

*I find it easier to read print books but ebooks ... don't get damaged in workshops*

Many respondents talked about the “experience” of reading print, and this emphasis on physical experience reflects the embodied nature of training, and high levels of visual and tactile learners, at a place like NIDA.

*It's easier to work with the object rather than a digital device.*

*There is something about paper that makes things so much more enjoyable to engage with*

*E-books are very convenient but nothing really beats the experience of actually reading a physical book.*

*only use e-books when i've forgotten to borrow the print book! Print books easier to read and more tactile*

*I get to keep a hard copy of it for future reference, and... I prefer scribbling down my thoughts on paper.*

*I find print books much easier to focus on over electronic books.*

*I like being able to engage with a book as a way of disengaging with technology. Reading an ebook, I find it hard to stay focused. I also like being able to read a book anywhere/anytime, and do so a lot of on public transport. I also like being able to sit somewhere comfortably with a book, instead of a laptop.*

In the context of comments made about making notes on paper, it is worth mentioning that Drama Online – like most e-book providers – does offer annotation and bookmarking features. But in order to use these, students have to create their own accounts with Drama Online. This may account for lack of use of these features. Other studies have shown that students generally do not like relying on connectivity to access their own notes, or creating extra unnecessary online accounts. Annotating and writing notes on paper saves time for students who are more interested in getting their work done, not exploring software designs and figuring out how to work various online interfaces (Hobbs & Clare 2016).

Student preferences at NIDA often reflect the same reasons other undergraduates might use or avoid electronic reading. Eye strain was cited repeatedly as a reason for preferring print.

*Reading an e-book off a screen for a prolonged amount of time strains my eyes, whereas printed books do not.*

*I can get eye strain from reading off computer for extended amount of times, HOWEVER the accessibility of digital copy is great.*

*I don't always have my laptop on hand to read the e-book. Also print copies are nicer on my eyes than staring at a screen :)*

*I prefer to limit my screen time, due to the fact that I work on a computer all day. Having a print option rests my eyes.*

*I prefer the feeling, and also reading on a screen hurts my eyes after a prolonged time.*

*I find it hard to stare at a screen too long as it dries my contacts and gives me a headache*

On the other hand, the accessibility and convenience of online reading was mentioned favourably by respondents.

*While I generally do actually prefer print copies when reading, instant accessibility to me is far more important.*

*because they are easily accessible, and can be accessed instantly.*

*The accessibility if a paper play is out on loan you can always get an e resource.*

*As long as it's easily accessible I don't mind. I like the the traditional paper and ink, however when there is only a limited number of these texts it's frustrating if they're all out on loan. The online versions are easy to access and they are an handy resource. At times when paper plays haven't been accessible I've gotten out of tight spots by reading the plays online.*

*especially when many people have been set the same playscript availability of print copies can become problematic. it can be good to know what everyone is reading the same version with the drama online. however I personally prefer reading from a physical book*

*I prefer reading print copies wherever and whenever I can get them, but sometimes when I am at home or otherwise unable to get to the library I find it immensely useful to read scripts online - even just for recreational reading*

*I really like the convenience of drama online, I don't have to worry about a book not being on the shelf or having to remember due dates.*

*Because Drama Online makes plays a thousand times more accessible to young students like me.*



Aside from specific creative reasons, these responses from NIDA student-practitioners actually reflect studies of general undergraduate populations. University undergraduates in other studies have also indicated a general preference for print over electronic formats for academic reading, but various factors such as accessibility and complexity of access affect their actual behaviours (Mizrachi 2015). This is seen at NIDA in responses where students say they prefer print, but will use online versions of texts when it meets their immediate need.

### **What did we learn about Drama Online in this survey, and is it meeting our students' information needs?**

Our survey and statistics suggest that Drama Online is a popular and well-used resource among students. Students appreciate its convenience and range of materials. We received generally positive feedback on it, with the only negative responses relating to certain aspects of its discoverability and a general preference for the print experience.

Drama Online meets its users' creative needs by presenting a wide range of material for browsing and access. Where it doesn't meet users' creative needs is through its very nature as an online interface, by seemingly inhibiting or restraining processes such as visualisation of space, embodied tasks and ways of making meaning (scribbling on paper, pattern cutting, moving around space).

Drama Online meets its users' academic needs by providing set readings that are accessible and convenient compared with library-owned print copies. A drawback of using this resource, or any online reading, to our students is difficulty focussing on the screen, or eye-strain.

### **Scope for further research**

Our survey has opened up scope for further qualitative research into how student-practitioners in the performing arts find and make meaning from information. We are particularly inspired by recent qualitative studies in this area, moving away from the quantitative survey-based research common in the LIS field. Two studies in particular have given us inspiration for future research methodologies. In 2015, Jennifer Mayer published her findings from a series of focus group interviews with performing arts students at the University of Wyoming, and this is an approach we think might work in our environment. Similarly, Kendall Hobbs & Diane Klare at Wesleyan University studied undergraduates' e-book use over time by using a combination of a quantitative survey with longitudinal usability study interviews (2016). This combination of quantitative and qualitative research allowed the researchers to evaluate student opinions and preferences alongside the actual behaviour they displayed. These studies show us some of the ways we can develop our

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research projects at NIDA beyond simple surveys and into something that helps us evaluate our library services in more meaningful and creative ways.

In a small institute like NIDA it is common to assume that we know what our students need and want. However, undertaking small research projects, and identifying ways to conduct further research, allows us the wonderful opportunity to hear and engage with our students' voices. It is even more necessary when we consider the continually changing nature of education, library services, and the arts industry in Australia today.

### What are our takeaways from this project?

- The introduction of online learning and development of specialist online resources has had a sizeable impact on library usage since 2012 and we expect change to continue – **we need to be flexible and listen to our community needs.**
- The survey was useful for getting a picture of our user needs and behaviours, but more **qualitative data would enhance these results** (e.g. focus groups, interviews, or participatory design)
- We encourage *arts publishers* to create specialist online resources that meet practitioners needs in terms of **ease of use** and **variety of content** – if you build it they will come
- We encourage *libraries* to engage with their community about how they're seeking and using information online. **Don't assume – do the research.**

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