



**MARKETPLACE:** Mr Tay Wei Kiat, founder of the BookInBookOut portal that facilitates buying and selling of secondhand textbooks. (PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN)

# Tertiary students go online to buy or sell textbooks

BY KENNY CHEE

**A**T THE start of each semester, Singapore Management University (SMU) student S. J. Neo goes online in search of used **textbooks** she is not able to get from friends.

"It's definitely cheaper than buying them new from the bookshop. I also sell my textbooks on the site," said the 21-year-old, speaking to *my paper* last week about online used-textbook store BookInBookOut.

She gets \$10 to \$20 off the \$25 to \$40 list prices for her textbooks through the portal. She does so because **tertiary-education** textbooks tend to be pricier than those for secondary or primary schools. Some textbooks could cost more than \$100 each.

Many tertiary students like Ms Neo have turned to such privately run websites that help match textbook sellers to buyers. The demand has led to more portals springing up over the years, with many started by students themselves.

One of the latest entrants is Used-Book, launched last December by Mr Dennis Luan, 29, a part-time Master of Business Administration student at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

BookInBookOut was set up by SMU student Tay Wei Kiat, 23, in late 2009 and, last October, it merged with another online textbook marketplace called Buyback Asia which catered to NUS students.

Other online stores include sgTextbooks, launched in 2009 by Mr Alvin Poh, 26, who graduated recently from SMU, and Secondhandbooks, founded the same year by 34-year-old housewife Rohaidah Russell and her husband.

An older site, BookFishing, was started in 2007 by information-technology engineer Lim Dawei, 29. He initially started it for students in Nanyang Technological University when he was still an undergraduate there.

BookInBookOut and sgTextbooks are dedicated to trading textbooks, while the rest also offer other book genres, like fiction.

Their popularity has been **burgeoning** of late.

Mr Poh said sgTextbooks had about 2,000 to 3,000 textbooks listed initially in 2009 but this has grown to over 12,000 now. Secondhandbooks saw a 40 to 50 per cent rise in textbook sales from 2009 to last year, said Mrs Russell.

For BookInBookOut, Mr Tay said 20,000 to 30,000 textbooks were sold from 2009 to the end of last year. It has sold 10,000 books so far this year.

Many portal owners said they started their sites to address the shortcomings in many online used-textbook marketplaces, such as public e-mail folders and online forums.

Mr Luan said that online forums linked to technology or university websites are "not organised" for book buying and selling and book listings often lack detailed descriptions.

Mr Tay noted that some sellers and buyers post on forums their personal contact details but this posed privacy concerns.

Another **gripe:** Public e-mail folders and forums often had outdated book listings.

"This led to much frustration and numerous calls before a book that is actually available could be bought," said Mr Lim.

kennyc@sph.com.sg