

THE NEW PARADOX OF THE COLLEGE TEXTBOOK

By James Lichtenberg

This article which appeared in the September/October 1992 issue of Change, Volume 24, Number 5, Pages 11-17, is reprinted with permission of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation. Published by Heldref Publications, 1319 18th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-1802. Copyright 1992. At the time of the original printing, James Lichtenberg was an independent consultant in New York City specializing in the field of education. He is now vice president of the higher education division of the Association of American Publishers.

While not always beloved by students, the familiar textbook--written by college faculty members and published by commercial companies--played a central and unquestioned role in the delivery of higher education in the four decades following World War II. In the words of one professor, the textbook is "the single most significant tool an instructor has in teaching..."; in the words of another, it is "a second voice in my classroom." A recent survey of students indicates that, in their view, as much as 55 percent of the "knowledge" they receive in college courses comes from textbooks.

In many ways the textbook is a unique artifact, the crossroads where teaching, curriculum, and students meet. These distinctive qualities, however, have not protected it from adversity. Like most everything else to do with higher education, textbooks have entered an era of sustained challenge and change. Starting in the '80s, they've endured increasingly frequent shocks of an economic, attitudinal, technological, and market-ing nature.

The irony of this, from the publishers' perspective, is that textbooks have never been more beautiful, sophisticated, or useful. Four-color, graphically enhanced, usually supported by a stunning array of multimedia ancillary materials for classroom use, the textbook--really the textbook "package"--is a premier vehicle for

teaching and learning. It is built to last a lifetime. These qualities seem all but lost on students as they stand in a buy-back line at the end of the semester, anxious to extract cash from the return of their books.

The purpose of this article, then, is to illuminate the way things currently stand at this "unique crossroads," both positive and negative, and to propose new paths that might be followed for the benefit of both campus and publishing communities.

The great growth in textbook publishing came in step with that of postwar American higher education. Before World War II, textbook publishing was an elite business dominated by one company, Macmillan. By 1960, however, there were over 50 companies or publishing entities in the marketplace. The field was dominated by "gentlemen" publishers who journeyed from campus to campus to sign professor-authors. For several decades, it turned out to be a profitable as well as enjoyable enterprise for professors and publishers alike.

During the past decade, however, sharp jumps in the costs of marketing and textbook development led to declines in profit margins. A clear sign of this is the flat financial results reported for publishers of college textbooks in 1991 compared with the previous year. According to statistics from the Association of American Publishers, college textbook publishers (including 36 reporting companies)

grossed approximately \$2 billion in 1991, representing an increase of just 0.3 percent over 1990. (For the sake of comparison, the 1991 sale of textbooks was fractionally more than that of adult hardbound books and fractionally less than the sale of elementary and secondary school texts.) Today's flat growth rate, admittedly, counters a long trend of solid, occasionally double-digit growth in the college textbook market for well over a decade. (Between 1989 and 1990, for example, the growth rate was 8.1 percent.) There is much recent discussion of "price resistance" among students, but--as will be seen--the resistance may be symptomatic of changes in attitude running through the current situation.

One of the most important of these attitudinal changes coincides with the increased popularity of used books; in 1991, used books rang up some \$500 million in sales--this on top of the \$2 billion in new-book sales. While there has always been a justified market for used books, until the '80s it remained essentially local. With the advent of new technologies, however, it became possible for customer-oriented book wholesalers to manage a national distribution system in which books could be bought and shipped anywhere. This reality changed bookstore buying patterns. Many college stores now look first to used-book wholesalers to fill demand; only when no more used books are available will bookstores contact publishers to order new books. This has serious impact on publishers: every consequent loss of a new-book sale means no revenue to the publishers and no royalties to their authors. While used books are indeed less expensive to students, the flourishing used-book market exerts an upward push on costs in a tighter market for new textbooks.

A more insidious consequence of the used-book marketplace is that intense on-campus promotion of used books, combined with textbook buy-backs from students, reinforces an attitude that textbooks

continued

are simply utilitarian commodities to be purchased only when absolutely necessary, as cheaply as possible, and sold back as soon as the course has been completed.

Perhaps the most serious long-term challenge to the traditional textbook is posed by the rise of new technologies. The computer, coupled with an ever-expanding array of interactive, multimedia information-delivery systems, such as the videodisk, points to a future in which course materials may be altogether paperless, involving video, graphic, audio, and computer simulations to a degree that would have seemed like science fiction when most of the current faculty were themselves college students. The Center for Scholarly Technology at the University of Southern California is but one of a growing chorus of experts who argue that we are experiencing a "conceptual shift in the definition of information resources . . . away from producing print products . . . toward electronic access to text materials on campus networks and in college libraries and classrooms." Representing a view not necessarily held by his colleagues, Richard Snyder, head of the publishing giant Simon & Schuster, declared in an interview in the *New York Times*: "We are not a publisher. We are now a creator of copyrights for their exploitation in any medium or distribution system."

Electronic information technology has already led to the rise of photocopied course packets. Drawing from journals, books, textbooks, magazines and newspaper articles, and their own class notes, professors are putting together anthologies of course materials "published" by copyshops or campus copy centers. These course packets are assigned to students as a supplement to—or even in lieu of—textbooks. Students seem willing to pay as much as \$40 for these materials, which have no afterlife and may be poor to illegible in quality.

Publishers acknowledge that copyshops have become an important element of their publishing chain. Following a successful lawsuit against Kinko's Graphics Cor-

poration that resulted in payments of more than \$1.8 million by Kinko's, reaffirming the need to obtain permission from copyright holders to use copyrighted materials in course packets, publishers have taken steps to build cooperative relationships with campus and copyshop personnel. The intent now is to ensure that copyright protocols are respected, that permissions can be obtained quickly and easily, and that appropriate royalties are paid. In addition, a few publishers are making forays into "custom publishing," offering a high-quality, mix-and-match book creation service via high-speed photocopy machines using materials a professor might choose from among a given publisher's list of books and journals.

A sign of the seriousness of this technological challenge to traditional publishing is that college bookstores have become concerned about their own future on campus. A growing number of campuses, ranging from David Lipscomb to Iowa State, are wiring up high-tech, interactive, information-sharing systems. A recent article in the *Harvard Gazette* indicates that computers and information technologies are about to become a far more prominent feature of America's oldest university. Eventually, students will visit the "electronic" library from their own dorm-room computers, browsing through electronic catalogs and downloading material from huge databases. Harvard's library system has already begun to scan its vast ink-and-paper collection into such a database.

It is not surprising that the manager of a large, newly remodeled college store recently remarked, sotto voice, that he is planning for the eventuality of *no* books at all in his store—possibly, in 10 years. Students will find their way, sodas in hand, to comfortable chairs at electronic ordering stations from which they will select the already electronically bundled materials for each course; these may be downloaded onto computer disks, printed on paper, or sent directly to their dorm-room computers, with

payment automatically deducted from their student debit card.

Needless to say, this is a far cry from today's bookstore scene, with anxious students pawing through stacks of new and used books and waiting in long check-out lines. Will there be a bookstore? And what of the companies that thought of themselves as book publishers?

Even within the ink-and-paper college textbook world, there are harsh new complexities and divisions. In part, this is a consequence of the atypical business structure of the college textbook marketplace, in which textbooks are marketed to one set of users (professors), but are purchased by a different set of users (students), with bookstores providing services at the retail level.

In the past, textbook publishers concentrated all but exclusively on their relationship with professors, creating extensive sales forces of publisher representatives and liberal complimentary copy policies in order to encourage the adoption of their books. Students were all but invisible, with nothing to say about the product. This dynamic has changed significantly over the past few years; the relatively flat results of 1991 textbook sales was a message to even the most traditional publishers that their business needs a tune-up. And publishers are listening. This summer, a campus store trade paper reported that three publishers are now marketing low-cost, no-frills textbooks in response to price resistance.

Publishers now are reaching out for better communication with students about the real value of the textbook. Today, publishers and booksellers find that more issues unite than separate them; together, they are watching student behavior closely. Another focus of their joint attention is the appearance of the "leased" campus store. Confronted by severe economic pressures of their own, campus administrators often find it hard to resist the promise of significant annual "profits" as the result of this "privatization" by owners who lease their bookstores.

continued

In terms of the economics of the textbook itself, however, one of the most vexing issues facing publishers has grown out of their own marketing practices. To help professors provide better classroom instruction, and as a way of making their text more competitive, publishers began to develop ancillary materials for the adopting professor--instructor manuals, student workbooks, slides and overheads. In the last decade, as the marketplace grew more competitive and faculty demands became more aggressive, the development of these materials mushroomed.

In some cases--particularly in business and the social sciences--these free ancillary packages include as many as 100 different items to accompany a single textbook, including computer disks, complex multimedia instruction aids (such as videodisks), and even (it has been reported) jokes for the first day of class. Unquestionably, these elements can support the learning experience of students. They have, however, become very expensive to produce and distribute (amounting to as much as 50 percent of the entire cost), and they push up the price of textbooks in the bookstore.

Students, however, are largely unaware of what their instructors got for the adoption; they see the price rise--and they complain. This issue has become a thorny one among college textbook publishers; they recently implemented a "Statement of Principles" concerning what materials can be offered to support textbook adoption--and how they are to be offered (see box).

As the industry moves into the '90s, publishers remain worried that the ancillary materials "tail" risks wagging the textbook "dog." Futurists argue, however, that this is merely the way in which the industry is transforming itself. In their view, the definition of teaching materials will simply flip-flop; high-tech ancillaries will become the "product" that publishers will need to price appropriately and sell to students rather than give away to professors. According to this scenario, the printed material (formerly

the textbook) will serve the same role that a manual does in a word-processing software package.

Another issue threatening the financial stability of the textbook marketplace is the sale of complimentary examination copies by college faculty to college bookstores or third-party salesmen. There are reported cases in which the adoption on a campus of a just-published book has been filled entirely by complimentary copies ordered from used-book wholesalers. According to some authors, this constitutes a "theft of royalties." The industry estimates the losses at \$10 million a year in lost royalties and \$100 million a year in lost revenues. Professors respond that publishers are selling unsolicited books they have no interest in and need to dispose of; publishers point to instances in which professors cynically request comp or desk copies with the intention to sell them.

The situation is aggravated by wholesaler representatives who cruise faculty hallways with shopping carts offering cash on the spot for comp/exam books. Publishers have developed a return mailing strip that can attach to any comp/-exam copy a professor decides he or she doesn't need. The office of the attorney general of North Carolina has issued an opinion that, insofar as professors at state institutions receive books in their capacity as employees of the state, the books belong to the college and not the professor.

Along with these marketplace changes, a sense of wariness has grown up between professors and publishers, with a sense of lowered status for textbook authors in academic eyes. There are repeated instances where professors bad-mouth the texts they assign ("it's not really that good but it's the best there is"), a habit that contributes to students' declining perception of the books they buy. It is even more harmful to students' sense of the value of a textbook when professors assign books from which they neither teach nor test.

There are probably several roots of this undercutting posture on the

part of some faculty, including professors' desire to deflect the focus of student protests about "price" away from themselves. Whatever the case, booksellers routinely report student "rage" during buy-backs at having purchased a book for \$40 or \$50 that the professor "never used." The irony here is that textbooks, as they scale the heights of pedagogic and technological capacity, fall to the role of scullery maid.

The key to this irony may be in understanding that, along with technological and corporate changes, textbooks are caught in a cross-fire of misinformation, competitive pressures, and new attitudes about education itself. While none of these factors is decisive by itself, cumulatively they have skewed a marketplace, undermined the valuable partnership that professors and publishers long enjoyed, and, most importantly, clouded student appreciation of teaching materials and thus of intellectual pursuits.

Stepping back from the day-to-day problems, it reasonably can be asserted that if publishing companies are able to move with the technological times, their value added in terms of initiative, creativity, quality control, and marketing assures them an ongoing role in the development of teaching materials--no matter what forms of delivery evolve to meet the changing needs of higher education.

To understand more about the possible future of textbooks, it is useful to examine two of today's thorniest issues: the writing of textbooks and their costs. The issues surrounding textbook authorship are complex; their full presentation would require a separate article. The issues include:

- complexities created by the fact that the author is only one of several creative, controlling people involved in textbook development;
- the pressures on publishers as business people to maximize the likelihood of recouping their investment given the high costs of development, printing, and marketing; and

continued on page 19

Paradox

continued from page 17

- the many disincentives to writing a textbook, given prevailing values in academic life.

Until the early '50s, all major textbooks were written by faculty members with Ph.D.s from elite institutions. Book contracts were signed on the basis of a complete manuscript or a large portion thereof. Editors visited campuses, signed authors, and occasionally even performed copyediting on the manuscript. Today, the pool of authors tends to be of a less diverse nature; it frequently is made up of teachers in community colleges. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it is important to the industry that college textbook authors come from the full spectrum of academic institutions and accomplishments.

Over the past two decades, the key player in managing the development of the textbook has become the professional editor involved in the macro-planning of the book. (Appleton-Century was the first publisher to create a book in this way, but the publisher that most influenced the practice of the "managed manuscript" in the college textbook industry was CRM in the late '60s . . . its books, in addition, startlingly emphasized both student-oriented writing and the use of color.) Today, the job of the "editor" includes scanning the potential market for a book, driving its overall concept, and formatting and developing the strategy for positioning it against the competition.

Textbooks, which require up to five years to move from concept to bookstore shelf, are now most frequently the outgrowth of an editorial idea. An editor with this good idea targets a likely author and arranges a series of meetings to develop a prospectus describing the book. The goal is to make certain the final product is defined as fully in advance as possible, with clear understandings of what is expected from the author, in order to minimize the risk of failure. And the risks are there: the development costs for a basic biology text, for

example, are now a minimum of \$500,000, exclusive of printing and distribution—a tenfold increase over what they were in 1970. The editor develops a detailed bookplan, including a writing schedule, competitive analysis, and graphics scheme, then oversees the editorial process and the collaboration of graphics, audiovisual, and other creative and business people involved in the project. Within this system, professor/authors must be not only good writers and masters of their fields, but good negotiators as well—especially if they have innovative approaches to their subject matter. Many fine writers among the professoriate have no stomach for this.

Another factor complicating the development of a good textbook is the enormous growth in the graphic component of college texts over the past decades. Today, excluding the end-of-chapter summaries, questions, and study aids, a major biology textbook will have no all-text pages whatsoever. This factor has driven the length of biology books up and up, from about 400 pages when the reader was in college, to an average of 800 pages 10 years ago, to a projected 1,450 in books now on the boards. The problem, according to some critics, is that the new graphic elements are simply added on, without a coherent graphic "style" commensurate with the text. In addition, these graphics can push production costs way up.

Especially in more elite institutions, potential textbook authors find among their colleagues an undercurrent of disdain for college textbook writing. Faculty mentors and department heads are reported to counsel against spending time on textbook authorship, portraying it as something of "no academic value" that may even work against success in promotion and tenure. These attitudes, which favor the creation of specialized new knowledge that benefits other specialists over the synthesis of a discipline for a larger audience of learners, has become a factor in higher education's "teaching versus research" debates: the low regard for

textbook authorship is seen as further evidence of the devaluing of teaching itself.

Ernest Boyer, in *Scholarship Reconsidered*, has sparked strong interest in a broader definition of scholarship that gives equal status to the synthesis and presentation of knowledge and the discovery of "new" knowledge. These initiatives have led to surveys that have reportedly discovered "closet" support for teaching—even among faculty at research universities—indications that this might provide support for the creation of teaching materials as well. Nevertheless, some scholars of textbook authorship, such as Professor Kathy Hellenman of the University of Iowa, do not see the future of textbook authorship in particularly rosy terms, suggesting that there is more evidence of rhetoric than actual behavior. They see an ongoing devaluation of textbook authorship that reflects, in part, the envy of some faculty for the financial rewards to their colleagues from a successful book. They fear the rise of a shadow class composed of outcast professor/authors whose involvement in textbook writing banishes them from the esteem of their campus colleagues and condemns them to the fringes of the academy like modern versions of the dispossessed samurai warriors in Japan's late middle ages, wandering the countryside without links to any potentate.

Publishers, of course, decry negative attitudes about textbook authorship. They second the belief of faculty members concerned about the quality of student experiences that a good textbook is central to the learning experience and is a singularly important tool for the conduct of a course.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the scene today has to do with perceptions of the price of textbooks. Of course prices have risen. But despite the used-book market, the sale of complimentary copies, and increased production costs, textbook prices—contrary to perception—appear not to have

continued

risen faster than the prices of other major commodities such as automobiles, energy, housing, and higher education itself. According to the well-regarded annual cost survey conducted by the College Board, the cost of textbooks and supplies has actually *declined* slightly over the past decade as a percentage of college costs. However, every autumn sees its share of articles in student and local newspapers decrying the "high price of books."

This "sticker shock," as it is called in the bookselling trade, is partly a result of the fact that, in college, students are paying for their texts for the first time. After 12 years of viewing teaching materials as something to be taken as much for granted as the school building itself, the real costs of books often come as quite a surprise to students and their families. Parents, unprepared for these costs, feel put-upon; students see a \$30 book as a dent in discretionary income for beer, clothes, and pizza. Even a student who is in the fortunate position of being able to purchase \$100 running shoes becomes incensed at paying half that amount for a book that may influence the future success of her career. As Professor Robert Blystone of Trinity University in Texas notes, a \$50 biology textbook, used about 100 times during the year in classes and labs, has a per-use cost of less than a candy bar.

Another factor is that the perception of "outrageous textbook prices" is fanned by the constant barrage of promotion from used-book wholesalers and even college bookstores anxious to promote the used-book business. Even on elite Ivy League campuses during freshman week, the only overt commercial message in evidence will be banners promoting used books. In addition, as noted earlier, professorial attitudes toward the value of textbooks create frustration among students who legitimately become angry at having to purchase something that is ill-used.

Despite good evidence about these dynamics, the textbook industry has been unable to unite in any large-scale campaign directed at students to re-establish a more positive perception of the cost and value of the college textbook. Nor has it succeeded in re-educating college faculty about the scholarly value of textbook authorship or the value of constructively adopting and assigning textbooks for classroom use.

Given a complex marketplace, it is probably messianic to hope that the parties involved could step back and then each take a more constructive step forward. However, if we assume that the primary goal is educational quality rather than personal gain or short-term cost savings, then what each of the players needs to do is not hard to define.

In the spirit of "the best of all possible worlds," and with one nervous eye on the many outside forces that now threaten the richness and autonomy of academia, the following suggestions are offered:

- Publishers must become more sensitive to needs and voices in the marketplace. They must also open themselves to the opportunities in the technological evolution from ink and paper to electronic formats, where audio, video, and computerized elements are co-partners with text itself.
- Faculty need to re-establish the important spirit of partnership with, rather than disdain for or cynical exploitation of, teaching materials. They must consider book adoptions for their classes based on academic merit, and request only those ancillaries that they need. When they assign books for student purchase, they should point out that books are important elements in the learning process; they should support the books they assign by teaching and examining from them.
- Faculty and administrators, along with reaffirming and rewarding classroom teaching, need to understand the high form of scholarship required for textbook authorship—scholarship that is intellectual-

ly and socially an equal of, and complement to, research. They will give weight to textbook authorship in decisions about tenure and promotion.

- Administrators need to view the relationship between campus and course materials less as an opportunity for revenue than as a means to provide a high-quality academic experience for their students. They should promote attitudes throughout the campus community that support intellectual pursuits and respect intellectual property.

- Bookstores, similarly, need to approach the campus in terms of maximizing the intellectual and academic value of the services they offer. They should shun practices that promote short-term saving at the cost of long-term price rises.

- With some optimism, let me hope that students would learn to understand the long-term value of their course materials. During their all-too-brief and precious college years they should focus on their future well-being rather than on the forgivable lure of a few extra dollars that the selling of their textbooks may provide.

Finally, even if the understandings just outlined come to prevail only in part, textbooks, in whatever format the market eventually dictates, will again take their proper place as valued, supporting "voices" in the learning process.

Ed. Note: Professors Hellenman and Blystone are members of TAA.

**REMEMBER
TO
MARK YOUR
CALENDAR
JUNE 24-26
NEW ORLEANS**