Do Your Students Really Need that $200 Ebook?
Predatory Publishers and Ethical Questions

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Abstract: Textbook costs have risen 1041% since 1977 (Popken, 2015). The internet allows educators to create and disseminate educational resources and to share the wealth and the creations using special licenses. The research is now in, and open educational resources, or OERs, have been shown to have just as good as, and sometimes better, learning outcomes than standard publisher materials. To keep profits flowing, publishers have designed impressive software packages marketed as superior to standard textbooks. For a hefty price tag, students are promised superior, adaptive, and even miraculous learning experiences while the instructor languishes in the background. This paper asks the question, what are we selling students, and what are we losing for ourselves as teachers in this educational material jungle.

1 INTRODUCTION

Back in 1998, twenty years ago, students began asking me, "Do we need the book?" and "Do I have to have the book?" By 2000, students were giving me a lot of attitude about requiring a textbook. I was teaching technical communication. And I was starting to receive a strong message from students along the lines of "How dare you make me buy a TEXTBOOK?" I remember venting to a colleague, saying, "It's not like I INVENTED the idea of having a textbook in a class! What is the problem with these students?"

I didn't realize two key things. First, in 1988 when I was an English major, my most expensive textbooks cost about $50. And that was rare. Usually, the novels my professors assigned were more like $1-$10. English majors didn't generally have high textbook costs compared to other majors. Secondly, textbook prices skyrocketed between 1988 and 1998. In fact, "According to NBC's review of Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data, textbook prices have risen over three times the rate of inflation from January 1977 to June 2015, a 1,041 percent increase" (Popken, 2015).

2 THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

A lot has changed since 1997, when I first sat down at my new position at a state institution and was given a very old computer to work with. A few years later, all the faculty were invited to technology workshops, and I found I really liked it. We were presented with free tools like wysiwyg html editors and easy little learning activity softwares. Even dowdy old PowerPoint had cool things you could do with it to liven up study guides. At the end of the last century, if your students had digital supplements for their courses, it was because their professor was tech savvy and liked to play with this cool new thing called Web 2.0 tools. In other words, we built our own PowerPoints, learning exercises, games, study guides, or what we would now call, course packs.

2.1 Web 2.0

For a while at the end of the last century and moving into the new one, every educational conference had a few panels devoted to Web 2.0 guides. Think your students didn't get enough practice on that vocabulary? Try Hot Potatoes! Want some grammar drills? Try GrammarBytes! Do you have some workable html skills and want your students to play with a very 80s looking "Choose Your Own Adventure" scenario? Try Quandary! All of these were free tools. Instructors were creating amazing activities for their students at a time when such work was not recognized by tenure and promotion guidelines or even faculty evaluations. And to be honest, I would share with my colleagues that I created practice activities for my students for things we learned in class using these free, cool softwares,

and you wouldn't be surprised to hear that sometimes my colleagues responded with, "Why would you use time doing that when you could, just, not do it?" And there was no research to validate that these things made any difference at all. At that time, too, coursepacks for various LMSes were just being offered by major publishers for the more widely used textbooks. Instead of the discs of PowerPoints or booklets of overhead transparencies we used to get, we could download quizzes and PowerPoints right into our LMS. As far as I know, those came with no additional fees for the students.

2.2 The Publishers Strike Back

At the very start of the century, when the publishers came by my office and said, "Hey, we have a whole host of interactive, cool activities for your composition class. They are all online. All in your learning management system. And when your students do them, the grades go right in the gradebook! All you have to do is use our book for your composition class," I was excited. I made two assumptions. First, I assumed that the cost would be comparable to what I paid when I was in college. And second, that what they created was of course much better than what I was creating. I was wrong on both counts. It was 2001. The software did not integrate into Blackboard. The students were paying a lot of money, I found out later, for a product that didn't work. This was the first time I had dealt with individual access codes that came with a textbook purchase. Sadly, the product made Blackboard unusable in any way. I had to take it out. There was no refund policy. It added no value to the course. And I realized that my idea of course supplements was much more sophisticated than the major publishers at the time. I developed a bit of attitude. I felt that these publishers did not know what they were doing. They had wasted my time and the students' money. And from now on, it was just the textbook and my supplements, and no fancy access codes for the students.

I felt good about that. But I had no idea what was going on in the world of textbook publishing.

I had attended a small, private, liberal arts school for my undergraduate education. My tuition was covered by scholarships, and my parents paid for my books which weren't that expensive because, as I noted before, I was an English major. But not every student is so fortunate. According to a 2012 survey from Florida Virtual Campus, "A survey of 22, 129 post-secondary students in Florida found that 64% of students reported having not purchased a required textbook because of its high cost" (Hilton, 2016). As

stated in the beginning, textbook costs are rising fast. Why? It seems there are several reasons. One is the lockdown publishers had on education: "Tim Peyton, vice president of strategic partnerships at Pearson, said it was no secret that publishers like Pearson had made textbooks too expensive and had seen sales drop as a result" (McKenzie, 2017 "Inclusive"). Greed proved to be the publishers' undoing, as the internet and then the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement pushed out the bloated pricing.

2.2.1 Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources, or OERs, is a term that was first heard at UNESCO's 2002 Forum on Open Courseware. The definition is below.

> Open Educational Resources (OERs) are any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. The nature of these open materials means that anyone can legally and freely copy, use, adapt and re-share them. OERs range from textbooks to curricula, syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, tests, projects, audio, video and animation. (UNESCO, 2016).

OERs are not just freely available, but also freely available to adapt and share by anyone.

When I was first asked to join the Affordable Learning Georgia group as the Kennesaw State University Campus Champion for Open Educational Resources, I attended a conference where the lone publisher representative berated us for a solid hour for choosing inferior products for our students. "You know what you get with free, right? You get what you PAY FOR!" he taunted. His presentation was packed in between speakers from OpenStax and Lumen, the big name OER groups "You'll wake up! You'll realize that you have to pay to get quality!" He was quite obnoxious as he ranted at a group who had assembled solely for the purpose of learning more about Open Educational Resources, or OERs.

2.2.2 Libraries, Television, the Internet

In one way, it's the same old story. Libraries, television, and now the internet have all been hailed as a revolution in education. People will be able to learn anything, anywhere! For FREE! Or, well, free after the purchase of the television or the computer and internet access. And now, we are finally to a point where there are enough resources on the internet that we can use them instead of costly textbooks. In fact, OpenStax and other publishers have free textbooks

for students. But what we have learned with libraries, and television, and now the internet is that providing the resources isn't enough. Especially today, the population most in need of educational resources also needs support in using them. The success rate in MOOCs is abysmal, and the students who most need degrees also need the student support elements that are absent in most MOOCs. Along with access to free resources, students also need teachers who can curate those resources and support the effective use of them.

2.2.3 Course Materials in the United States

In the United States, students often wait to buy their textbooks until after their student loans come in, and that means they may spend the first two weeks of class without the course materials they need to make a strong start. Once they are behind, it is hard for them to catch up. Or, students may choose not to purchase the course materials at all. In a recent study by VitalSource, which is an e-textbook provider, 85% of students surveyed in the US and Canada "had delayed or avoided altogether purchasing textbooks for their courses" (McKenzie, 2017 "Study"). And the research on OERs clearly shows that students receive higher grades when OERs are used in a course (Colvard, Watson, and Park 2018). They are more likely to complete their courses. And the students who benefited the most were "Pell eligible students, underserved populations, and part-time students" (Colvard, Watson, and Park 2018). It's no magic bullet, of course. Students perform better because they are able to have the course materials starting right away in the course and throughout.

In the years following that first conference on OERs, I had publishers visit me in my office using a variety of tactics to sell their wares. Some seemed genuinely eager to negotiate and get the prices down on textbooks. They had created looseleaf versions that were quite a bit cheaper than the traditional bound copies. They were willing to unbundle their products—or bundle them—to pass along savings. And then there were the publishers who were angry, talking down to me and telling me that only publisher materials could deliver superior learning experiences. That the price was worth it. That I had to work with them and assign their products in my classes because I was the OER champion (not sure what the logic was on that argument).

At one point, a frustrated publisher yelled at me, "You can't give your students what I can!" I responded, "I can give them all that, and more. You see, I am an expert in this field and I doubt you or your instructional designer have a PhD in African American women's literature. And I can create all the learning objects you are touting. In fact, I already have created a great deal of them, specific to my class and course goals." His face was red. "Well," he sneered, "do you think you are going to go into the 21st century with your paper textbook and your homemade course materials? And do you think other faculty will follow your lead?" Again, students do say they want the extra support that online resources give them. In fact, 88% surveyed "felt they could earn better grades using interactive digital course materials that have features such as end-of-[chapter] quizzes and online notetaking compared to traditional print materials" (McKenzie, 2017 "Study"). But again, that doesn't mean we have to charge students through the nose for such resources.

And I guess the pushy publisher representative didn't read the sign on the door that explained that I was the director of my college's Office of Distance Education. And I guess he didn't understand what a technical communicator actually did, which in this case, was teach the faculty how to create their own course supplements. "This is Kennesaw State University," I responded. "And I don't think you know our faculty." As he stormed out, I contacted our Affordable Learning Georgia office to let them know about this guy.

But while publisher representatives didn't get much headway with me, they got a lot of traction with less savvy faculty who saw the products and didn't realize there are several parts to this "solution" they were purchasing with their students' money.

2.2.4 Working Hard to Stay Profitable

For example, a lot of the major publishers create "course packs" that include quizzes and PowerPoints and other learning objects that in the past faculty would create ourselves. In the past, these packs were free to download into the learning management system. But now, students purchase a "bundle" that includes some online resources along with the textbook, or even better the etext because it is not available for resale. Publisher reps will show faculty cool videos and interactive learning activities along with data analytics to make the sale—and maybe throw in some gift cards or a laptop for the faculty member as an incentive to adopt the textbook and software. But when the class actually gets taught, faculty who teach online might just stick the PowerPoints and quizzes in and call it an online course. Faculty teaching face to face might use the PowerPoints, or change nothing about the course at all. Students are paying a large amount for a

"bundled" and "technologically enhanced" textbook with all kinds of snazzy features, and yet the faculty are not making it worth their money. It is at this point that we have to ask ourselves, as faculty, are we giving away our freedom to teach and create course content because we ourselves are "buying" this package that only the publisher can create high quality course materials? Are we pushing high prices onto our students at the expense of our own academic freedom to choose the content and the way it is taught? At the same time that we are selling our students these high priced teaching tools, are we selling ourselves short and letting our expertise languish? As my colleague David Johnson asks, "If hyperlinks, e-texts, and Google searches have replaced deep reading guided and assisted by an instructor, then how long will it be before YouTube, PowerPoint, and publishers replace professors in their university teaching role?" (Johnson, 2019).

In another example, faculty members see the publisher demonstrate the cool features of the courseware without asking "Is this compatible with my LMS? Will this feature integrate into the gradebook of our LMS? Has your company worked with this particular LMS before? Do your customers find this tool hard to learn to use?" And the faculty member pushes the cost onto the students only to realize that he or she doesn't have time to learn how to use this snazzy new tool. The very thing that was supposed to teach better and save time gets pushed to the side due to research obligations or just life, and students have paid an extra $200 for a service or product that the professor doesn't use.

When direct selling to the faculty member didn't work as well as publishers had hoped, there was a different strategy called "inclusive access." Jumping on the research findings that students don't perform well in courses when they don't have the assigned textbooks—and that students likely do not have the assigned textbooks because they can't afford them—well-known publishers such as Pearson, Cengage, and McGraw-Hill Education are part of what is called "Inclusive Access." It sounds good—help students perform better by helping them to start classes with their textbooks. But what is not stated in the beginning of the pitch is that

> institutions are signing up whole classes to students to automatically receive digital course materials at a discounted rate, rather than purchasing individually. The 'inclusive' aspect of the model means that every student has the same materials on the first day of class, with the charge included as part of their tuition. (McKenzie, 2017 "Inclusive")

What's shocking about this program is that this process happens with no input or consent from the student. In fact, the student would have to learn about it before classes started and "opt out" in order to avoid the charges. While yes, students often do get the very best prices on the course materials through this system, publishers are winning at the expense of student consent. And if publisher materials are not accessible to a particular student with, for example, a sensory disability, the student is stuck with the bill for materials he or she cannot use.

"Inclusive Access" uses the research from the OER movement to support major publishers' for-profit plan. But it is not the only publisher-driven strategy to make money off open educational resources. Intellus Learning (owned by Macmillan) and Knewton (previously backed by Pearson) are products designed to identify open educational resources to add to courses. Universities and libraries are the potential customers. "There are lots of free resources!" the pitch begins. "But how can you find them? Subscribe to our tool to get access to all the free materials on the internet!" I was in test groups for both these tools. Knewton had a limited amount of disciplines it served, and even then, it wasn't able to find the open source materials I often used. Intellus had such a complicated platform that it tried to force customers to use (apparently trying also to push customers into Pearson's learning management system), that it was unwieldy.

It definitely seems fishy to save students money by paying big name publishers to find open educational resources for our faculty to use. And why should one do that when a resource like OASIS: Openly Available Sources Integrated Search (https://oasis.geneseo.edu/) exists for free. And it works so much better than the ones that come with a price tag! We don't really need to spend money to search for free resources. To be honest, we are educated people with access to Google, so paying extra for something that is already available to us, and that no one can vet better than we can, doesn't sound very smart.

2.2.5 There's Another Side to the Story

But OERs are not the panacea that I may have painted them to be. At the end of the day, a qualified teacher has to find them and shape them into a valuable component in a class. And that work requires time and expertise. In Hawaii, "a bill that would have forced faculty members in the University of Hawaii system to use open educational resources" (McKenzie, 2018 "Hawaii") was pulled back because it did not take into account the realities of OER: 1)

The materials don't exist for every course, 2) It often takes time for faculty to move to OERs or shape existing OERs into appropriate course materials. There are other limitations, as well. While many complain that the OERs are not as high in quality as publisher materials, research shows that both OERs and publisher materials can be found that are high quality or in need of editing, depending on the source.

And that brings up another issue. Stories abound of institutions forcing faculty to write or curate or otherwise create course materials and make them freely available as a condition of employment. Such stories may be apocryphal, but they raise another issue. If faculty are forced to create OERs, will they be motivated to create high quality OERs, or just throw something at the students to fulfil the mandate? One can see a dark side to OERs might exist, whereby faculty are pushed to create or curate less than optimal resources in the name of keeping prices down at all costs.

2.2.6 In Conclusion

Back to the TV or internet—as the miracle of the library showed, students who need free resources also need a guide or teacher. Publishers are pushing hard to take on that role—for a price that our students have to pay in addition to tuition. Are we willing to give that power away to a publisher who does not have our expertise? Or shall we ponder Larry Hanley's injunction that "For edupunks, the commercialized CMS imprisons teachers within an iron cage of copyright, privatization, and commodification; open-source software and a d.i.y. ('do it yourself') ethic empower teachers to hack together projects, platforms, networks driven by learning rather than profit" (Hanley 12). Edupunks are defined by Jim Groom as teachers who use technology themselves to "challenge the 'cold and all-consuming role that capital plays in the shaping of technology as a means of control'" (Hanley 2011). Let us retain our power and our pride in our expertise as teachers and be very aware of the true price of what publishers are asking us to sell our students.

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