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The Object Formerly Known as the Textbook

By Jeffrey R. Young

Textbook publishers argue that their newest digital products shouldn't even be called "textbooks." They're really software programs built to deliver a mix of text, videos, and homework assignments. But delivering them is just the beginning. No old-school textbook was able to be customized for each student in the classroom. The books never graded the homework. And while they contain sample exam questions, they couldn't administer the test themselves.

One publisher calls its products "personalized learning experiences," another "courseware," and one insists on using its own brand name, "MindTap." For now, this new product could be called "the object formerly known as the textbook."

"In the early days of TV, the first things you saw on TV were radio shows, and only over time did the next format evolve for that medium," says Don Kilburn, chief executive of Pearson Learning Solutions. "I think we're at that stage right now" with textbooks, he says.

Major publishers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in the past few years buying up software companies and building new digital divisions, betting that the future will bring an expanded role
for publishers in higher education.

So far publishers produce only a limited number of titles in these born-digital formats, and the number of professors assigning them is relatively small. Only about 2 percent of textbooks sold at college bookstores are fully digital titles, according to a survey of 940 bookstores run by Follett Higher Education Group.

But if these new kinds of textbooks catch on, they raise questions about how much control publishers have over curriculum and the teaching process, as online education expands.

"It's not a textbook, it is an entire course," says Jean Wisuri, director of distance education at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College, describing a product called Course360, from Cengage Learning. "It has activities built right into the textbook itself."

A professor could essentially rely on a Course360 title as the full curriculum in an online course, letting students loose in the system and having them teach themselves. The Course360 titles connect to the university's learning-management system, linking them directly into an institution's existing virtual classroom.

But Ms. Wisuri says she is not worried about the software's replacing professors. "The 'course in the box,' if you will, should only be a jumping-off point for faculty members," she says. "Our faculty has the freedom to pick and choose what they want from the materials."

As these "courses in a box" continue to improve, though, they could shift the professors' role to be more like pilots on modern commercial planes, who let the autopilot do the flying except when they have to step in.

Colleges as Publishers?
Publishers aren't the only organizations building this new kind of textbook. In a way, MOOCs, or massive open online courses, which many top colleges are experimenting with, offer the same mix of features without any involvement from a textbook publisher.

Those MOOCs are designed to teach unenrolled students free of charge, but colleges are also starting to try using MOOC content as a replacement for textbooks. It's called "flipping" the classroom. Students are asked to view lecture videos and to do online exercises for homework, and then use class time for discussion or group projects. In that model, the "MOOC is the new textbook," says David Finegold, senior vice president for lifelong learning and strategic growth at Rutgers University at New Brunswick.

"Instead of saying, 'Go read a text,' it will be, 'Go do a MOOC,'" he
says. "And we’re going to use our classroom sessions to help with that rather than to spend a lot of time lecturing."

Amid all this change, the lines separating publisher, professor, university, and software company are blurring: The blockbuster textbooks of tomorrow could be produced not by publishers but directly by universities, maybe with the help of MOOC companies like Coursera or Udacity.

Publishers, though, say they aren’t worried about MOOCs' eating into their business. "we view it as an opportunity much more than a threat," says William D. Rieders, an executive vice president at Cengage Learning. Like several other publishers, Cengage has experimented with offering discounts on its titles to students taking free MOOCs.

And some colleges may end up hiring publishers to help them build MOOC content, say some publishing executives. "Some of these things in the coming learning applications are fairly expensive to produce," says Mr. Kilburn, of Pearson. "Private companies have a lot of help that they can lend to that."

**Entering New Sectors**

Publishers are also moving into new business sectors entirely.

In 2010, McGraw-Hill Education purchased Tegrity, a software company with a product that lets colleges automate the process of recording campus lectures and streaming them back to students on demand. The move supports a feature of the company's new breed of textbooks, called McGraw-Hill Connect, which lets professors embed their own video lectures inside one of the company's e-textbooks. That same year Macmillan, another major textbook publisher, entered a partnership with Panopto, a competing lecture-capture company.

In some cases, publishers are building new product divisions on their own. In 2011 Pearson made headlines by announcing that it would offer a free learning-management system to colleges called OpenClass. But while many colleges gave it a look, few have replaced their installations of Blackboard or other learning software with the publisher's offering.

One way or another, the names of publishers are popping up more and more in announcements of new online-learning efforts.

This fall, when Rutgers announced plans to increase its online course offerings, officials revealed that they had selected Pearson as the university's partner.
The deal had almost nothing to do with textbooks, though. Rutgers was mainly interested in eCollege, which Pearson purchased in 2007 for $477-million, and other support services the company now runs for online courses. The contract with Rutgers shows that the publisher has pushed into a different sector, playing a role more as a consultant and investor in colleges' programs. Pearson and Rutgers will split the revenue from the online courses evenly during the first year; later Rutgers will get up to 65 percent.

And Pearson isn't the only publisher getting into that sector. In October, John Wiley & Sons, another major textbook publisher, bought a company called Deltak.edu, which helps colleges run online courses, for $220-million.

The final deal between Rutgers and Pearson did involve textbooks from Pearson's publishing divisions, says the university's Mr. Finegold. Professors at Rutgers can freely use any of the company's texts or software simulations in their online courses built with Pearson and can make that content available free to their students.

Mr. Finegold emphasizes that this doesn't mean professors have to choose books from Pearson. But in the courses for which professors do adopt Pearson textbooks, that will represent an unusually deep role for a publisher—helping to build the virtual classroom, the curriculum, and the course materials. And that raises the question of why students need the university at all, if the publisher is the one doing much of the teaching. (Publishers, for their part, insist that they have no desire to push out instructors.)

These companies who make the object formerly known as the textbook don't even use the word "publisher" much anymore. As Mr. Kilburn, of Pearson, puts it: "We've gone from being a textbook company to being a learning company."

How Textbook Publishers Are Turning Into Tech Companies

Textbook publishers do far more than print books these days. The five biggest players in the textbook market have collectively invested more than a billion dollars in the past five years buying software companies and building technology-services divisions. They're betting that the future is digital and that the transition can let them enter new parts of the education business.

Scroll along the timeline below to read about major acquisitions and other moves made by five major publishers.
So increasingly "content" including what is deemed important and what is deemed "canonical" in a field -- that is, the consensus of what should be taught and how it should be taught -- will be controlled by profit-making companies, who increasingly have the whip hand over institutions and even in some cases are signing contracts committing everyone teaching at that institution to use one supplier's products. Is anyone else deeply disturbed by this prospect?

It's why I am making ever-more-robust use of fair use copyright law in making PDF's of the material I choose available to my students.

How is this any different than what we've already got in textbooks? If an undergrad dynamics textbook has a decent section on rotating body mechanics, then most profs are going to cover it. They could still choose to skip it and instead teach a section which is NOT in the book, but most don’t. A lot of that is because the vast majority of profs agree that what’s in a dynamics textbook is appropriate for an undergrad dynamics class. But some of it is also a matter of using what’s at hand, I'm sure.

My point is, profs will ALWAYS have the ability to teach more and grab materials from outside the book, MOOC, or neo-book-like-device. There's nothing new with the book defining the material used in the class. Only the technology has changed.
For years I've been saying that the worst thing wrong with e-books, was the word "book." I was in the college bookstore business for 25 years and now teach at the City Colleges of Chicago and I am very impressed with the evolution of the text-"book" but have one very substantial reservation: All the development costs that go beyond the traditional book come at a hefty price. By the way, our institution does have an adoption policy where we all use the same book. Often we choose an old edition to help the students save at least a few dollars.

I've thought about these issues for a long time, and I would summarize my thoughts as follows. When it comes to undergraduate education, colleges and universities have traditionally served two broad functions: i) organizing and delivering learning "content" to students and ii) evaluating the degree of success that the student has obtained in "learning" that content (I'm including skill sets, deeper learning, etc. under the concept of "learning that content"). Content is available everywhere now, and even the organization of it can be carried out outside of the university. As much as I hate to say it (I've always felt pride in my role as a "content organizer and deliverer"), we've lost the war in that regard. Sure, we're refusing to surrender, but no one really thinks we're going to regain our territory when it comes to controlling the organization and delivery of learning content. Universities themselves shoulder much of the blame: can they really claim that they were deeply committed to their role in undergraduate education when they turned over their classrooms to basically anyone with a Ph.D. desperate enough to take a teaching position? Why would they be so surprised that the public fails to see a difference in quality of undergraduate education if someone other than a live instructor is providing it? They haven't exactly been going around proving that undergraduate education is best carried out by highly skilled and trained professionals. This leaves the second broad function of colleges and universities in undergraduate education: evaluation of student learning. Unfortunately, I predict that we'll lose that one too. Speaking for my own institution (and I'm confident that it is fairly representative of most large universities), we haven't really put any thought or resources into student evaluation. Multiple choice tests that don't assess ability to organize and articulate what has been learned and assignments that can easily be hired out to essay-writing services would be pretty easy to improve upon once an entrepreneur put his or her mind to it. Oh sure, we'll complain and circle the wagons, reminding people that student learning evaluation is a complicated process best left to the professionals in the classroom but, again, it wouldn't be hard to show the bankruptcy of that notion. There is already plenty of evidence out there showing that many students can and do graduate from university without actually learning much. We don't seem to be too committed to fixing the problem. It's far easier to simply debate whether or not things are getting worse and, while we debate, others outside the university will come up with new ideas.

Well, thought out post, grward.

The general, run of the mill bachelors degree is the new high school diploma - almost worthless. The fact that you can put "run of the mill" before "bachelor's degree" tells you there is a problem.

And really, higher thinking, higher education people like US can evaluate that there is a problem with big-box publishing and canned courses. But to the first generation student,
who doesn't know any better, and is heading to college - and wanting low cost - and for the professor who is looking to teach 800 students in a huge lecture hall - a Pearson boxed course may be the answer.

Not a good answer, but AN answer. If you aren't paying for 25 student courses, and you're taking 800 person courses - you get what you're paying for. Canned, instead of organic. Sad.

"There is already plenty of evidence out there showing that many students can and do graduate from university without actually learning much."

True. But is this is problem of the students alone, or also of the department? SOMEONE gave these students a passing grade, didn't they? In fact, LOTS of someones did. Why, if they learned nothing?

I know my perspective is biased by my own choice of major. In engineering, there are usually right and wrong answers to things. Maybe that makes it easier to flunk students and give average grades of 80s on exams. After all, if the bridge falls down or the airplane crashes, then you've fail. No amount of arguing or beautiful sophistry can counter that. Similarly, an eigenvalue problem only has one correct solution, and no amount of BSing can turn your wrong answer into a right one.

Anyhow, I realize that majors with firm "right" and "wrong" answers have it easier than a lot of lib arts majors where things are more fluid. But I can't help but wonder if a lot of the reason why more of your students come out of college without learning things than is true in engineering is because you don't challenge them. Or at least, you don't FORCE them to be challenged (since the best students will always challenge themselves and do well). Frankly, a lot of your classes are known across campus to be easy to get, if not an A, then at least a B. Does this really help students learn? Wouldn't it be better to push all of them HARD, so your degree means more? Don't worry: your better students will still do well -- and they'll probably learn more in the process, too.

It probably is true that a lot of students get away with better grades than they deserved, but are you really ready to start a fight about the quality of majors? If that's where you want to go with your argument, you might wonder how many of the most influential philosophers have been engineers. All I mean by this is that a Humanities curriculum attempts to measure (and, granted, sometimes fails) the quality of the thinking, and because of the variables inherent in an almost infinite potential of human combinations, it requires a much broader view of what "right" answers are. For example, students hand papers in to me all the time that I disagree with. A solid argument (what you might call, in your wisdom, "beautiful sophistry." I think you mean "florid rhetoric," a difference you would know had you paid attention better in your Philosophy 101 course or in your Freshman writing course) and logical conclusions united by a good thesis and couched in cogent and well crafted prose might even earn an "A" because it makes a good argument and does not fail to persuade.

Perhaps the problem isn't with departments, but with the nature of the discipline. Not to dismiss your no-doubt well reasoned assessment of everything not you, but perhaps there are things out there worth thinking about that don't have definite answers--like the nature of love, ethics, beauty, justice, God, etc. Perhaps the Humanities even teaches the idea of thinking about perspectives not your own, which might have mitigated or even eliminated many of the flaws in your assumptions and rather reckless conclusions.
*sigh* I knew I'd get such a response.

Why is it that people think I’m against the humanities subjects, when I’m simply not. I actually ENJOY things like literature and I’m a lifelong flute player and music lover. I know less history and economics than people in those majors, surely, but a heck of a lot more than the average person -- and I learned most of it by choice. And I am absolutely certain that some people who get a humanities degree are both brilliant and insightful, experts at critical thinking, logic, and persuasion. Some of those people are my close friends.

Which doesn’t change the simple fact that OTHER people go through four years of college, get a degree in one of the humanities fields, and come out with no new knowledge but how to win at beer pong. You know it and I know it. I’m sure they’re the bane of your teaching existence, and I KNOW they’re a deep frustration to many quality humanities majors that I know.

But the fact is, they exist. And moreover, they’ll be the first to tell you that they picked their major BECAUSE IT WAS EASY. You can talk about "florid rhetoric" and wide-open thinking as long as you’d like, but that doesn’t negate the fact that a significant fraction of your students don’t come anywhere near to deserving the degrees you’ve given them. Sorry, but that’s just a fact -- and it waters down the degrees of those of you who DO deserve them, so frankly, I’d think you’d be more upset about it than me!

Finally, you, like most other humanities arguers, seem to believe that you can ONLY find "the nature of love, ethics, beauty, justice, God, etc", learn how to create "logical conclusions united by a good thesis and couched in cogent and well crafted prose", and come to think "about perspectives not your own" in a humanities discipline. I don’t deny that you CAN learn these things in humanities, of course. But I DO deny that they’re not found in other places. Anyone who’s ever written a technical paper knows the benefits of clear and cogent writing. Grant writers need to learn persuasion backed by logic. And I’m sorry, but if you can’t see the beauty and elegance in a well-written computer code or mathematical proof, that’s your loss, not mine. Justice and ethics? Not specifically taught, but I think a student (and surely a worker) in a discipline which is so intensely group-focused as science and engineering needs to know something about that.

So, sorry, but you have not convinced me that my conclusions were "reckless". You have provided no proof against my (verifiable) claim that a significant fraction of your student come out of college knowing little more than what they did when they started. Nor have you noted that I SAID that it was easier to judge absolute grades in engineering, where correct answers are more "black and white" than what you often see in the humanities. Instead, you ignored everything I said to get offense with the idea that humanities classes are, in one specific way, less rigorous than engineering ones. And then you started spewing strawman arguments every which way, which have little or nothing to do with what I said. If this is the fine "florid rhetoric" of which you are so proud, you are being a spokesman for my case! Why not try a little evidence-based logic instead -- as, perhaps, you should try grading your students with a little more often as well?

Perhaps it’s your tone or the way you frame your responses, which tend to be: "maybe your problem is your majors which are soft and easy, where my major of engineering is not." I believe you have valuable things to offer in your posts, and I have read many of them without responding, but frequently (and this is not a slam, but a gentle response to your query as to why you always get this kind of reaction) you have a tendency to belittle things outside your frame of reference, perhaps without intending to. The defensive nature of the responses you get may mean that there is something within the way you structure your points that sounds condescending or hostile.

Just something to consider.
I see your point. The problem is, I'm darned if I do and darned if I don't. I've previously posted comments which don't state my major or make a big deal of it, and then I'm told, "Well, that's only true in engineering; it's not relevant in MY field." So I think it makes sense to STATE when something is (as you correctly put it) "outside your frame of reference". After all, that's only being honest. If someone who does have a closer view of the picture can list a rational reason WHY things should be different between what I've seen in my field and what they see in theirs, I'm willing to recognize that. In fact, that's one of the reasons I DID mention my major in this comment, because the difference between engineering (definite "right" vs "wrong" answers) DOES make it easier to pick out the least competent than can happen in most humanities classes (where there are sometimes no purely "right" answers, and grading is often more subjective). I think that's a relevant difference, so I was trying to be fair in my comment.

More, look at what I actually said. I'll agree that my second comment was more snarky, because I was annoyed at -- AGAIN -- being accused of hating on the subject rather than the way it was being taught. And because nothing in the response contained actual logical arguments against what I'd said; it just claimed that since I'm an engineer, I can't understand humanities studies -- no further explanation.

But look at the first post. I tried to bend over backwards in the middle paragraph admitting the bias of my own position. The only comment I can see which could be considered inflammatory is this one: "Frankly, a lot of your classes are known across campus to be easy to get, if not an A, then at least a B." And that's well known and easily demonstrated. *sigh* I suppose I could just shut my mouth and let them continue doing what they're doing now, but isn't that letting down their future students? Who, for the record, could one day include my own children, and will surely include other people around me whom I depend upon. Don't I have the DUTY to note things, when I see that what's happening now clearly isn't working?

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Sorry Reythia, I thought I made it clear that we're the ones at fault for graduating these students. I wasn't trying to pass the blame onto the students. In my university, we are reminded over and over that "student retention" is the word of the day, and that we must accept ever larger numbers of incoming students. We don't have to simply pass everyone to water down the requirements: there are all sorts of subtle approaches (especially in the STEM field in which I work) that will ensure that we don't lose too many of them. We start to direct the students to specific parts of readings instead of simply assigning a whole journal article, so students aren't required to develop the ability to organize information in primary sources and extract the important points. We start to provide "sample midterms" before the real ones so that students can learn to "game" the test better. We stop requiring term papers and replacing them with short reports that don't require the same level of sustained attention, because they are easier to grade. Worst of all, we start to let things go by in the marking, such as spelling and grammar errors, formatting errors, etc., because we just don't have time to argue with the students, especially when the course is over and we'd much rather move on to the next term's courses. Standing tough and expecting high standards from the students won't bring rewards and accolades in many universities: it will just leave you with fewer hours in the day to get the "more important" things done.

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Agreed. Sorry for misunderstanding your perspective. I agree that part of the problem (of course) is the students, but as you say, teachers who stick to their guns would go a long way to countering the students' attempts to avoid learning hard things.

Of course, that should start a long time before college, but there's still pressure we can put on the students once they're already in college, which can help motivate. After all, there aren't that many students (including me!) who WANT to do long, hard work, if we LET them avoid it!
Personally, I would not pay to be taught by a text book. As a student, I was paying not only for the class materials, but also for the chance to engage with and be challenged by a person who had spent their lives studying and experiencing what I was there to learn.

Is this what you received at your institution of choice? Or did you receive one way "dialogue" from a TA who is only teaching an undergrad course because they have to?

Yes, it is what I received. I rarely had a TA as a teacher. I can think of only one class where a TA taught, and even then only if the prof was absent. This course was a large required humanities core class.

It's also what I received for most of my classes (again excluding large freshman intro lectures). And I went to one of the largest univs in the country. I won't claim every single prof was great, but the majority were pretty good. So were most of the teaching TAs who would teach one day a week "recitation" practice sessions between the prof-led lectures.

I'm not against using a neo-textbook as a resource, to practice with and grab info from that I didn't understand in lecture. But like 2204... I find it hard to believe it would be as good as a real teacher.

Interesting that the timeline begins in 2007, but Cengage (at that time Thompson Learning) published an all-digital textbook in 1997 using technology from MediaTechnics Corp. That textbook, New Perspectives on Computer Concepts, included an page-for-page digital version of the printed textbook, plus photos that morphed into videos and screenshots that turned into guided software tours. Results from interactive end-of-chapter activities and practice test were sent back to instructors via the WebTrack system.

Key characteristics of the technology used for this digital textbook are its scalability and efficiency; two factors absolutely necessary for annually producing the book's 800-, 600-, and 400-page editions that include thousands of clickable key terms, hundreds of interactive video elements, huge test banks, and a massive number of external links. Time to produce the digital book; one person, 4 days. But that technology is unique as it was developed in the field over the past 16 years.

The success of the technologies mentioned in the article will depend on their scalability; The trick is to produce a quality learning experience while maintaining a consumer-friendly price point.
The first time I heard a higher education expert say we needed to stop calling them textbooks was at a conference in 2009 when Mark Milliron said we needed to stop thinking "textbook" and to think more broadly about what learning materials we deliver to our students and how we deliver it. See more at http://bit.ly/Vhnfmn

Milliron suggested the term "curricular resource strategies". I think that was too vague or hard to say in order for it to catch on. I prefer "alt-textbooks". http://bit.ly/112BXUg

While it's interesting to read what the commercial publishers are doing to bring print textbooks into the digital age we need to remember not to repeat the mistakes of the past by giving away the academic content faculty produce to publishers who will then sell it back to us and our students in prohibitively expensive packages. That's how we got into the scholarly publishing mess in the first place. http://bit.ly/14p0wJ0

Now is the time for textbook change, but perhaps options beyond what is described here.

I think Jeff and Marc (in the paired article) have done a good job calling attention to the evolution of (1) technology-enabled content, (2) business strategy of publishers, (3) buying behaviors of students, and (4) the co-evolution of digital content in the form of textbook replacements to MOOCs. I do think the economic angle may yet be missing.

How will students buy digital materials? They won't be sitting in stacks at various retail outlets, and we've already observed some of the concerns of selling ebooks and competition (or lack there of) in trade books and fiction.

What happens when the eLab for Cost Accounting is ONLY available from one source? There will be no marketplace to set and moderate pricing for digital content that may be required by a professor -- especially if completing auto-graded exercises in the lab is the only way to complete a course. Should the price be $29 per retail charge to each student? $89? $179? $289? Students will no longer have the tools of a used book market, foregoing buying a text, sharing a book, or (gasp) digital piracy. Who will watch out for the students' interests? We see paper textbooks now that hit the market in the $200-300 price range, so what will happen when there are few moderating effects on price? Yes, Open Access is part of the solution, but it will be quite some time, if ever, before that path covers the range of needs.

Our view is that the win for students, authors, and publishers is to move from a retail priced consumer market for digital content to a business-to-business (wholesale-like) model. We've modeled and demonstrated that students can pay less than (on average) those who succeed in buying used and succeed in selling a used paper textbook; authors/publishers can make more in digital than paper; and faculty can know that EVERY student has the required course materials. This model works for eTexts or the deeper online exercises that Jeff described.

If the institution is going to choose the particular good, e.g., the 13th Edition of Cost Accounting from Publisher, then the institution can use its volume to negotiate a far better wholesale price with the publisher on behalf of all students rather than hoping students can find a good deal as their traditional substitutes (used, skipping buying, sharing, etc.) evaporate. We've done that with software like Microsoft, Adobe, or even Google campus arrangements, and the model there works for content too.

There is lots to think about in this journey from print to digital educational experiences (+ print on demand as needed), and Internet2's Net+ has been enabling some volume-licensing pilots for many institutions as well. I'm glad to see this coverage, and we've learned a lot in the three years of eTexts pilots and full rollout at IU as we've worked with faculty council, students, administration, and 4 of our 5 largest publishers. The model is in use as faculty prerogative on our small and our large campuses as well.

This is an important topic, and I'm glad to see deeper coverage of it in CHE.

--Brad

Our FAQ from the three years of work is at http://etexts.iu.edu.
unlimited making real inclusive education possible. Texts can be as simple or complex as the reader's ability with pre and post tests to check prior knowledge and then comprehension before allowing the learner to go on. Pre-reading activities can increase comprehension. Texts can be created by anybody for anybody making mother tongue education possible if people in those languages could be trained to create the mother tongue books. Very sophisticated concepts can be illustrated by inserting short videos, photos etc. Students can tap words they don't understand - even use a bilingual dictionary. E-books can have an audio track so students can hear the text as well as read it thus hearing and learning new words. Simply amazing!

Great insights from the comments. Many recognize that the roots of the dramatic changes in course delivery and content were easy to foresee. How many of them have had the opportunity to influence the strategic planning of their institution to be prepared for these changes? As higher ed continues to respond "on the fly" to free courses; online degrees; accreditation; and faculty policies the situation will only worsen. The "boiling frog" should be cooked by now.

What is not mentioned in the article is this: Students don't really "purchase" an etextbook like they would a Kindle or Nook book. The etextbook is "available" to the student for 180 days from "purchase" date and then access is shut off. Basically, the students are renting the etextbook for a semester, not purchasing it for future use.

Centuries ago when I was going through, I groused to one of my profs about the high cost of textbooks then (this is not a new problem). His reply was that the expectation was for students to build their own personal professional library, to which they could refer once they earned the degree and were practicing in the profession, whichever profession that was. Although expensive, the books were a long-term investment. But, with the 180-day timer running, students can't even use the book next semester, much less in 3 years in a career. This just seems to me to reinforce the practice of "just learn it to get through this class so I can move on" rather than for longer-term memory/reference outside the classroom/academy.

I made this point to one of my textbook reps, and after some research on her part, she told me that the 6-month access/"rental" was how her company and most others would operate for the foreseeable future. And the purchase option for etextbooks (like tradebooks) would not be an option.

I think most people agree that eText "rental" is really a silly marketing term that has little to do with the underlying economics of content creation or use. IU's arrangements with publishers got beyond the 180 day timeout. As a professor, I'd like for my students to have access to all of their licensed, full-text searchable, eTexts with annotations for at least the full time they are a student at IU. We were able to achieve that with the publishers in our arrangements as they are win-win to both publishers and students. This is a very critical time for institutions and students to assert "how we wish to buy digital" and not only respond to offers of "how some wish to sell." The road to digital can be win-win to improve education, reduce the overall cost of attendance, and reward content creators as well.

When college text-books were printed, they were used a teaching tools by the various academic departments. The control of what went into the book was in the hands of the college academics and since they and their departments were supported by industrial and commercial interests, certain inconvenient truths could and were easily be held out of sight by these tune-callers. This situation was particularly true in subjects like economics and political science, whose
inexactness allowed biased opinions to be accepted as real facts. Consequently today most economists really don't understand why our current crisis will not solve itself. They were not allowed to find out!

Consequently the trend for the control of the material in the replacement e-books (of more recent times) appears to be a take-over by the publishers. Does this mean that in future it will be necessary for deals to be struck between these publishers and the giants of industry so that the status quo of restricted knowledge will continue to be maintained? Or will it at last become possible for there to be so much more and available useful knowledge so as to allow some real public understanding about what makes our society function and whom is holding it back from its naturally occuring progress.

Like anything else, many institutions would rather choose to wait and see. As positive results begin to emerge, many of these will adopt MOOC. From all indications, course instructors will continue to be relevant. The goal is improved teaching and learning for which the student and instructor will be the beneficiaries.

Evidence of "improved teaching and learning?"—save time—don't look for the research.

Two of my students walked into my class early, opened their laptops and turned them sideways. When I walked over to see what was going on, they showed me that they had a PDF document (electronic copies of a public domain text), and they were holding their laptops as if they were books, after orienting the PDF so it would be right on the "page." I wondered why they just didn't have a book.

It is probably the case that books need to remain "books," but that something that dictates how one engages it, how one searches, how one annotates, and how one—to a certain extent—learns from it, might need to be called something else.

I can interface with my book any way I wish, as long as there is room for notes in the margin. Even the process of annotating an e-book involves extra steps and the cumbersomeness of a variety of functions that don't exist as I scribble notes in and around an actual text.

Having said that, my dissertation hinged on incunables in electronic format, which involved spelling regularization databases, an enormous collation program, and thousands of manuscript images. In the end, it was a perfect marriage of information and image, but was a very different textual experience. Further, engagement was limited by the fact that I couldn't handle the page, annotate at will, or leaf back and forth with ease.

It might not be a matter of either books or electronic versions of what we think the book is, but that books are books and these other things are other things that can supplement, replace, or accompany textbooks for classes. It is probably an error to think of them as mutually exclusive (which the authors of this article don't, of course), but many of the advocates of e-text call for the end of the tyranny of the textbook. So might we, but for different reasons, such as access and cost. If some of this can be solved by the so-called e-text, that's nice, but we err when we think that it is the same experience qualitatively as really taking on a book.

i like this publication...
"(Publishers, for their part, insist that they have no desire to push out instructors.)"

If they are honest in saying this, they should be fired. How could the outcome of this not be that publishers will become course providers? They are no more than a half-step from that now. My best undergrad courses were those where the professor had a textbook, but spoke outside of it or just cited it in lectures. With modern methods, a professor could guide discussions and projects. But a course-in-a-can provides all the metrics, all the matrices of goals and outcomes that accreditors, and thus administrators, like to see, and all with a mouse click.

I agree with the comments already posted about how textbooks provided the content teachers use and how the new model of "courseware" or digital driven learning experiences also provide content professors can use in their classes. Invariably, this new model of digital learning will affect and change the role of the educator. And I believe it will change it for the better.

Good educators know the true essence of learning and how the content they use can help students think differently, see new perspectives, wrestle with logical thinking and problem solve. What I would love to see from the education community at large, professors included, is more of a dialogue between the education community and the employers who some day will hire their students.

Academic research is extremely valuable and has enriched the development of our society. But what I don’t read about very often in this new world of discussion and collaboration is the educators in dialogue with and collaborating with those in the corporate world. As we all look to the future and try to determine what education will look like, I think a missing component in this massive conversation is the voice of collaboration and idea sharing between academia and our global corporations. This could truly shift our thinking and models of education.

When I look at the list of required reads, I’m not worried they’re called textbooks. I’m worried they’ll cost me at least half a month of groceries. Or should I say “I was”, because as of last year I decided to go all digital. http://bookboon.com/ has been of great help, since they have literally thousands of titles, all free and downloadable in pdf format. And downloading them is not pirating, because they actually hold the rights to all the books they host. I recommend it to anyone who wants to save their money.

I love the idea of e-books for my courses. They would be cheaper and the students would be able to pull them up on their devices instead of lugging big anthologies around or (more realistically) just not bringing them. I would even be all for doing away with the college bookstore (which raises prices on textbooks to an outrageous extent) and just having the students buy e-books directly from the publisher.

What I don’t like is all the proprietary “stuff” that comes with these e-books from the publishers that often drive the cost up as well. I can write my own tests, thanks, and my students learn how to use online databases for information in my classes. I require them to research articles in ProQuest and such even in my intro classes, and they learn to think and argue with scholars about the works we are reading. This could be facilitated with the use of e-books and tablets. Ah, my vision of the future course: all students have tablets, mine is wirelessly connected to the projector, and we all use electronic texts and do research in class to engage in our discussions. A girl can dream, can’t she?
Two thoughts: why do people think printed books are not "interactive"? They are as interactive as the reader wants them to be. Any learning that has ever happened with a textbooks has been interactive. An early iPad book app claimed to be the first interactive book because you could move the pictures around on the page, listen to audio, and (if you blew on your screen) a little wind turbine would turn and animations would show energy flowing. This is the Pat the Bunny definition of interactivity.

Second, why do people think ebooks from the same publishers will be cheaper? They have profits to make, and they are hoping to keep them while getting more market share and eliminating a used book market. A single text option may look cheaper now, but it won't be in the long run. The plan is to have fewer competitors and wholesale institutional adoptions and these companies will be vendors of the textbook-course management systems-tester-grader "solution." Which will come at a high price, but with reduced staff costs. One word: not plastics, outsourcing.

I believe it varies by field, in terms of cost for e-books (just like printed ones). In my field, for example, texts can be found quite cheaply for many courses. With e-texts I can avoid the need for an anthology because the students can more cheaply purchase the texts electronically. I suppose in some fields there are a limited number of available textbooks anyway, and so costs are higher regardless of platform.

And I agree, print books are just as interactive as electronic. For me, at least, it's not about interactivity; it's about portability and cost to the student.