

**Getting What You Pay For:
Piloting a Free eTextbook Program in an Advanced Writing Course**

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Chris Gerben / University of Michigan / cgerben@umich.edu

When I began teaching college writing in 2003, I was instructed to teach from printed textbooks. At one campus—I taught multiple sections of first-year composition at two schools, across three campuses, to cobble together a meager living—every instructor taught out of the same program-produced reader; a thematically-organized collection of mostly journalistic essays on a range of topics including gender, politics, consumerism, etc. At that school I also worked in the writing center, where student papers were generally about the same essays and the same topics, making for an efficient (if not a bit repetitive) job outside of the classroom. Across town I taught from a different commercially published textbook, containing essays by liberal arts stalwarts like Jamaica Kincaid and bell hooks. I could teach what I wanted, as long as it coincided with the 400+ page texts that students brought to class each day. The situation was fairly simple; I was required to teach from the textbooks, and students were required to buy the textbooks.

As a young teacher I appreciated the security and support that the textbooks provided. The themed chapters made sequencing and scaffolding more clear—both to me and to my students. Knowing that editors and fellow instructors followed the same patterns made me feel less alone, and moved me along the path from novice to (perceived) expert, even as I secretly panicked that I had no idea what I was doing. After that first year I felt that I did know what I was doing, however, I began constructing and requiring a printed coursepack of supplementary



materials I felt both complemented the textbook and expressed my burgeoning interests. The coursepack cost money, but I never questioned it. It was just another requirement that I believed instructors had the right to expect of their students. That notion, too, changed as I gained more teaching experience.

By my third year of teaching I had forsaken required textbooks, less for monetary reasons than because I was introduced to CMS (Course Management Systems) that allowed me to upload digital materials to a central server. I digitized my coursepack and copied chapters and essays that had been bound to old books, newspapers, and magazines, and put them all up behind a password-protected site that my students could access. Though I believed I was becoming a better teacher through experience and my own merits, my year-end evaluations contained one notable consistency that I couldn't chalk up to my expertise: students lauded the course's low cost and lack of required books. It wasn't until then that I realized how much textbook-cost these students were saddled with each semester, and how conscious they were of trying to cut that number down. It led me to also reflect on how little I actually used textbooks in class, even when they were required: out of a 400 page book, for example, even a robust class would only cover half the material. Through small revelations, I was a convert. I vowed to never require textbooks again.

My story is far from unique. As I've worked beside and mentored young instructors, one after another offers her first question as, "What book should I teach from?" Or, "What book do most teachers use?" These are fair questions for anxious teachers. Likewise, the textbooks I have used have been indispensable to my courses. I've come to meet and know some of the authors and editors, and my classroom instruction is modeled after their valuable lessons, even if no proper attribution is apparent.



Still, as debates loom over higher education funding and costs, and the apparent panacea of online learning appeals to more legislators, the teaching profession can no longer overlook, or appear indifferent to, instructional material costs, especially textbooks. We must take a stand. That stand, however, needs to be informed and based on empirical evidence as well as experiential expertise. In other words, instructors need to take an active role in driving the future of the textbook market. The first shot of economics has been fired ages ago, but the resulting battle requires us to be more pedagogically minded, cognizant not just of cost and efficiency, but of ideal classroom practices, even as our classrooms extend beyond school walls and into the homes, phones, and computers of our students.

The U-M eTextbook Pilot Study

As I transition from discussing my personal teaching narrative to a recent pilot study on etextbook use at the University of Michigan, let me be clear: the pilot study was, and is, an initiative of the U-M Library, Office of the Registrar, Information and Technology Services (ITS), and Literature, Sciences, and Arts (LSA) Instructional Support Services (Raughley, 2011). This is not my study. Instead, I've conducted anecdotal meta-research: observing, conducting focus groups, and user-interface analysis through my course and through my students. My *ad hoc* findings are independent (if not irrelevant) to the greater U-M study that is ongoing and hopes to end in recommendations to the administration about how, and if, the school should pursue implementation of an etextbook roll-out across campus.

As an instructor in a business and professional writing course, I was one of five instructors and courses taking part in the pilot study of winter 2011. Mine was the only humanities course represented (an English advanced writing course that will be explained more fully in another section.) The other sections represented civil engineering, mechanical



engineering, the School of Information, and urban planning. For our participation, instructors received complementary copies of textbooks for their students. Students, in turn, were asked to participate in voluntary surveys and focus groups in exchange for their free etexts. Instructors were given wide range to choose their textbooks for the semester: as long as the [CourseSmart](#) platform supported the books, we were allowed to request them. Though the website for CourseSmart advertises that their texts are half the cost of traditional textbooks, chair of the U-M initiative, Susan Hollar, reports that etextbooks on the platform are up to 60% less expensive than print versions (Raughley, 2011).

This pilot study at U-M is in response to textbook affordability concerns on campus, faculty research that began in 2009, and a textbook task force formed as early as 2006 (MLibrary, 2011). The 2009 survey results (which will be outlined in a later section) confirm that economics are driving demand (or lack thereof) for etextbooks. A 2009 survey of 19 campuses by OnCampus Research reports that though 75% of students prefer traditional textbooks to etextbooks, a study conducted by Student PIRG in 2009 shows that 75% of polled students would prefer a mix of traditional and digital platforms if cost were not a factor (qtd. in Nicholls, 2011). The final clause, “if cost were not a factor,” is important to keep in mind, both in these studies as well as the U-M pilot study. Students in my course continually grumbled about shortcomings of the etextbooks, but always came back to the main appeal that they were free. Though in these cases students failed to consider that the etextbooks would no longer be free after the pilot study concluded, even the 60% reduction in cost may be a big enough draw for them to overlook perceived problems.

Specifically, the etextbook pilot study at U-M formed in earnest in April 2010. As an instructor, I was invited to join in late October 2010, approximately two months before the start



of the winter semester. As a result, I was able to choose two textbooks that I wanted to teach from, cognizant that I would not have ordered any textbooks had they not been available for free. In the first weeks of class, librarians administered pre-study surveys to students across all five classes, including mine. They found that “students [had] relatively high expectations regarding ease of access, affordability, portability, and usability of the e-textbook without substantial gender or disciplinary differences” (Nicholls, p. 4, 2011). In other words, though many students didn’t know what to expect from the trial, they expected to be significantly impressed. As the instructor, I did too.

In my initial interview with the library, I can recall predicting that the etextbooks would change the way I teach. I could feel good about not requiring my students to spend money (which I’d been doing for years), but I could also deliver something new, and—dare I say—innovative, in a writing course that was largely based in imitation (e.g. producing professional resumes, cover letters, etc.) Though I had previously predicated all of my instructional material choices on pedagogical impact (i.e. good, strong, relevant content) and economic choice, I was now self-consciously drawn to embellishment. This was new and just a little bit exciting. To me, and to most of my students, this pilot study and this etextbook platform came overnight, as if the future had arrived without announcement. As it turns out, these views could not have been more naïve.

Previous Studies on Textbooks/eTextbooks

Courtesy of studies spearheaded by the Library, there is a rich amount of data available concerning textbook use and costs at the University of Michigan over the past 5+ years. In a recently updated report, MLibrary (2011) relays that over \$6 billion dollars a year are spent by students and families on new and used textbooks. This group averages over \$1000/year on



textbooks, which accounts for 26% the cost of tuition and fees. MLibrary also reports that new editions of textbooks cost close to 58% more than previous editions, with the average costs being approximately \$102. Like my participation in the pilot study, these numbers should not come as a surprise, nor should they be considered context-specific to the University of Michigan.

In 2007, the Department of Education presented a report to the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. The report, titled *Turn the Page: Making College Textbooks More Affordable*, culled data since the turn of the century, offering both a retrospective and some guidelines on moving forward. The report cites the average cost of textbooks to first-time students in 2003-04 to be approximately \$900/year (p. 5). Predicting the situation that participants in the 2011 U-M pilot study would encounter, the report also notes that most etextbooks (although cheaper than their traditional counterparts) are limited to use in one academic term, and limit the amount of pages that students can print at any given time (p. 35). This glorified rental service was true in my course as well, where students lost access to their etextbook after May, and were limited to printing ten pages at a time during the course of the semester.

The report's main argument is that the textbook market (both in 2007, and presumably still today) is driven by supply, and not demand. It argues that end consumers have no direct influence over price, format, or quality of product (p. iii). Though the report spends a large amount of time focusing on the downstream benefits (presumably economic) to students, it interestingly leaves them out of the final section identifying stakeholders. Instead, faculty, publishers, bookstores, and institutions are addressed, presumably because they are perceived as able to most effect change on a large scale. I find this interesting, though, because most reports—including this one—cite students' changing needs and media use as a driving factor for etextbook



demand. This report cites the increasing prevalence of electronic readers, but since 2007, devices like iPhones, iPads, Kindles, and near-ubiquitous laptop and WiFi use have only increased the perceived market for digital content.

Though I have yet to see such technology overrun my classrooms, their presence is undeniable, and the goal of meeting students halfway on media they already use appears both intuitive and intelligent. However, staking a movement on that campaign is ill-advised, especially as economic concerns continue to loom, and quality teaching (and teaching materials) will always be in demand regardless of the medium. This is why I return to my context-specific experience in my own classroom at U-M, and why I think the empirically-driven data collected by the U-M Library is not only relevant to my experience, but also to instructors and institutions plotting a similar course forward amidst an evolving academic environment.

In late 2009, the U-M libraries invited all LSA faculty to complete a survey related to textbook costs on campus. 260 faculty members responded, representing approximately 18% of the total faculty in the college. As seen in Figure 1, an outstanding 88% were aware of rising textbook costs. Likewise, in Figure 2, 84% of respondents say they use textbooks in their courses. Interestingly, the survey reports that length of teaching experience had no impact on this latter figure (Nicholls, 2009).

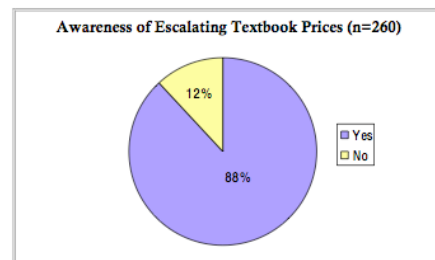


Figure 1

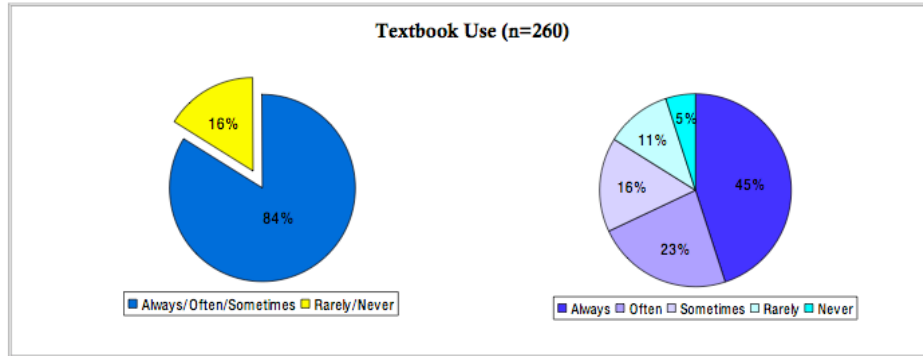


Figure 2

These survey results also reveal that 80% of faculty members are influenced by price in their textbook selection (Nicholls, 2009). This statistic confirms that I'm not alone in my knowledge of, and aversion to, requiring textbooks for economic reasons. However, this data may also take into consideration faculty who require a textbook, but seek out cheaper options or earlier editions that cost less. For me, the option has largely been either/or: I either required a textbook (as inexpensive as possible) or didn't. This gray zone, though, is important to remember even as e textbooks promise to offer cheaper options to traditional instructional materials.

One option that I've both contributed to and used in my own classes is the use of Open Educational Resources (OERs). These free—and typically loosely copyrighted—materials include syllabi, lesson plans, and increasingly, books. OERs are visible on such popular sites as [MIT's Open CourseWare](#) (OCW), [MERLOT](#), and [Connexions](#). Though these sites represent an ethos and practice that has existed for decades in teachers' filing cabinets and individual email accounts, the scaling up of participants (both contributors and consumers) marks a significant opportunity for publishing rights, and increased questions about implications regarding copyright, tenure and promotion, and compensation. Asked about this new generation of OERs widely available on the Internet, 71% of U-M faculty responded that they were aware of OERs

(Figure 3), but only 13% had used open textbooks in their own classes (Figure 4). Perhaps, again, confirming my experience as a maturing instructor, senior faculty were more likely than junior faculty to adapt non-traditional textbooks, such as open access textbooks and collections of OERs (Nicholls, 2009). It remains to be seen whether or not this trend will continue into the future. While popular media in the classroom seems to indicate so, the thorny issues of attribution and compensation remain institutional (if not institutionalized) considerations.

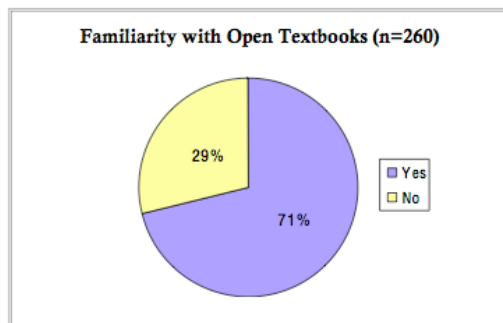


Figure 3

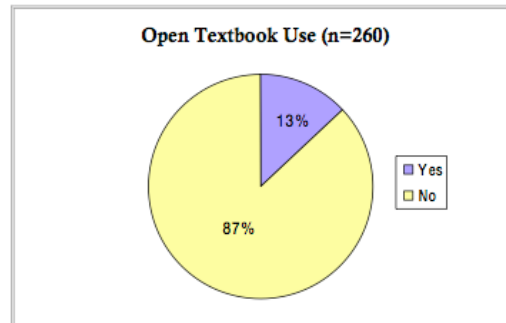


Figure 4

What this data reveals is an overwhelming awareness of the economic concerns over traditional textbook publishing. The data also reveal that instructors are slow to adopt open access materials for widespread use in their courses (after all, MIT's OCW has now been operational for ten years.) What this data does *not* reveal, however, is just as important. Instructors may be slow to adapt to new forms of publishing simply because students aren't ready yet. Both in the numbers reported above, and in my own class, several otherwise progressive students reported that they "just liked 'real' books." Likewise, instructors may have concerns about open access materials beyond the issues described above. Concerns over quality and ownership are compounded by the wide dispersal of materials over the Internet. Until OERs have a clear and consistent vetting process and distribution channel online, their use is likely to

remain marginal. As I will conclude in the final section, what has made traditional textbooks so trust-worthy in academia isn't just their medium, but also the gatekeeping and reliability informing their production. Before we reach that discussion, though, I briefly offer up my own course that was part of the 2011 U-M pilot study on etextbooks. In many ways it was a unique, singular experience, but in others it stands as a fairly typical test case, especially for writing-intensive courses.

eTextbooks in an Advanced Writing Course

What follows in this section is a brief description of the etextbook platform, and its use, from my winter 2011 advanced writing course at U-M, titled English 229: Professional Writing, which includes what has typically been called “business” and “technical” writing. Many of the insights provided here were first shared with an audience of approximately 150 people at an [Elsevier Library Connect event](#), “The Future of E-Textbooks: A Symposium on the Influence of E-Textbooks on Academic Life,” held in Ann Arbor on March 18, 2011. Full video of all of the speakers (including student speakers) can be found online.

English 229 has been undergoing a bit of an identity shift in recent years. Though the curriculum and textbooks popular for the course still largely emphasize traditional print and professional writing (e.g. a textbook I saw two years ago had an entire chapter on folding paper into pamphlets), there is no denying the increasing role that social and popular media play in influencing what most students consider “professional” writing. In addition to the time-tested assignments on crafting resumes and cover letters, my course also gave students time to construct their own personal websites, analyze their *Facebook* profiles, and tweet (via *Twitter*) information related to the fake start-up that our class assumed. Each week students did their writing as employees of the start-up, affectionately titled *edUMize*, by following both their



individual desires and the demands of the company whose only charge was to “solve educational problems.”

One major consideration of the course (and the use of etextbooks) was that it was held in a computer lab on campus. While the inclusion of nearly 30 brand new Macintosh computers was no doubt an affordance to access, the room’s horseshoe pattern positioned students to face the outer walls, often leaving them with their backs to me and to one another. I found it incredibly ironic (and perhaps just a bit irritating) that though we were utilizing such social and interactive technology, the configuration of the room made it impossible for students to both refer to their screens and to the center of the room where we held all of our class/company discussions. As a result, I think that space needs to be a major consideration for any discussion about etextbook implementation. Not only did some students view the material on their laptops, cell-phones, or classroom monitors, they also had to consider where they could plug in or face while doing so.

As mentioned in [my talk for Elsevier](#), throughout the course of the semester I returned to asking my students three very simple questions: 1) What do you like about the etextbooks? 2) What do you not like about the etextbooks? and 3) What would you change about the etextbooks? Though some of the answers to the first two questions were predictable and understandable, I found that the inclusion of the third question yielded the most interesting responses, if for no other reason because it gave students a feeling of agency that is largely missing from stakeholder debates surrounding etextbook discussions. Asking students this question allowed me, as an instructor, to not only demonstrate that I valued their experience and expertise, it also decentralized my authority in the classroom; this was a long way from my first year of teaching when I assigned the textbook and students were required to buy the textbook.



As far as what students liked, I return again to the observation that students “liked” the textbook program because it was free. When reminded that the books were only free during the pilot study, many students

ceased being so

enthusiastic, and instead

became somewhat

indifferent to the entire

platform. CourseSmart,

perhaps as a way of



Figure 5

appealing to this segment of the student population, grants access to course etextbooks through a main description page. Seen here, Figure 5, users are greeted with an image of the print textbook, bibliographic information, and then the price, \$37.95, which is placed directly above a reminder that students saved \$37 over the retail price of the print edition. Whether this design was intentional or not, it may have influenced student feelings about price each time they logged onto our CMS to access their etextbook.

While students nearly unanimously appreciated the economic benefits of using etextbooks (as well as the somewhat ill-informed belief that use of etextbooks was also environmentally friendly), their chief complaint was not that they would only have access to the books for a semester. Instead, students had concerns with the interface and usability of the etextbooks. As seen in Figure 5 above, the etextbooks were framed by our CMS. While the convenience of having all of our course information on one page was a major affordance, the scrolling required to move down the page or to flip pages was a major nuisance. Our particular etextbook was a glorified PDF rendering of the traditional print textbook. There were neither

added materials nor any usability embellishments. As a result, students reported feeling constrained to what they could do with the text on the screen. Not only did students need to be online to access the book (it could not be downloaded or transported between devices), but students could also only print up to 10 pages at a time, and could only provide two mark-up techniques on the text: highlighting in a pale yellow and inserting a note that appeared in a side panel to the text.

These complaints lead to my final, and most important, question I asked the students: What would you change if you could? Most interesting to me, when I asked students if they would use this platform again if none of their proposed changes were implemented, not a single student said she would. Students definitely framed their view of the etextbook through economics, but even free content needed to be convenient, efficient, and intuitive to use. Students largely felt that this current rendition was not, mainly because the platform didn't take advantage of the medium afforded it. Instead of offering multimedia choices (e.g. highlighting in different colors, interactive audio/video, ability to link to outside sources), the digital text remained flat and largely lifeless, unable to be personalized the way so many students are used to their devices managing today.

To say that students disliked the etextbooks or would always choose their traditional print counterparts in the future is overstating the observations just a bit. I think their opinions followed an arc that most people would provide when given something new and free: immediate interest and delight followed by smaller nitpicking and critique. Therefore, I don't offer up this experience as definitive proof of anything. Instead, I use it to back up the 2007 *Turn the Page* report mentioned earlier. Even though I attempted to give students agency in the decision process, they were ultimately unable to do more than condone or condemn the mass-produced

product. There was no possibility of individual tuning or revision in real time. Instead, students were in some ways once again required to consume a book that they had no recourse to refuse. Supply was controlling demand. Such an observation leads us to question not so much what the future of etextbooks should look like, but what role the stakeholders (including, most importantly, students) should play moving forward.

The Immediate Future of eTextbooks

Projections about the “future” of etextbooks generally tout the interactive nature of technology that drive current fascination with social media in fields as divergent as politics and journalism, or sports and cooking. Major online outlets look for “future” etextbooks that will be more interactive, participative, adaptive, and connected (Bjerede, 2010). Such reports are ubiquitous, and have been for years, even while we keep anxiously awaiting this supposedly distant “future” when everything will be figured out. Meanwhile, my students’ responses to our etextbook experience, and their suggestions for improving the platform, are incredibly insightful and interesting, but largely echo Bjerede’s reporting for a more social experience to consumption. We can call it the *Facebooking* of textbooks, or the *Twitterification* of learning materials.

My concern with such projections, other than the fact that the “future” has been taking place for over a decade, is that they still position instructors and students largely as consumers. Yes, we can personalize future editions to make them more amenable to our personal tastes and interests, but we’re still largely playing a shell game with pre-packaged content. Educational software consultant Xplana predicted in 2009 that by 2014, digital textbook sales would surpass 18% of the higher education market in the U.S. They predicted this growth would be determined by pricing, availability of content, advances in technology, integration of content with outcomes,



increased online learning, and the rise in open education resources (Reynolds & Ioffe, 2010). Notice how only the last issue positions instructors (and perhaps students, if we consider uploading content to sites like *YouTube* to be a form of open access publishing) as agents in this apparent sea change to 21st century instruction.

My argument, then, is not that instructors should abandon widely published commercial work, such as is found in traditional—and increasingly etextbook—formats, and instead begin uploading and swapping OERs individually. But instead that we confront a necessary paradigm shift to thinking about publishing and pedagogical choices less as a gatekeeping function, and more as a curating process. One undeniable fact is that through the rise of social media, every user is an author. Whether users are uploading OERs or tweeting about their lunches, communication online is directed to dozens, or thousands, of others in real (if not virtual) ink. The gatekeeping barriers to such communication and interaction have forever fallen. In their place, though, we must work to assemble our contemporary texts into organized, intuitive, and plastic forms that can serve both our immediate and future needs.

This curation role will take many forms. Whether new forms of publishing will be books or book-like; threaded discussions or games and apps; is less important than how we organize and utilize them in our classrooms. Returning to my initial narrative, though I was initially comforted by the uniformity and security of using a popular textbook in my first course, I eventually turned away as I felt more independent and economically minded on behalf of my students. For me, the “future” of the etextbook starts at the end of that arc and works its way back. Though we come to this discussion (both online and in person) as individuals, we only forge a secure and long-lasting future by pooling our resources, comparing notes, and working together to perpetuate the option of free choice moving forward.



Resources

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