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On the Pros and Cons of Being a Faculty Member at an E-text University

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Abstract

Professors are under intense pressure to write more papers and teach more students. Several large publishing companies offer e-texts that offer time-saving solutions to instructors. Such e-texts might include not only text but also interactive learning activities, videos, and simulations. Furthermore, they are often integrated into the learning management system (LMS) and include self-grading quizzes that feed directly into the LMS's gradebook. Such solutions might be particularly attractive to administrators because they offer a way to teach more students (possibly using adjuncts) for less money, particularly if the university enters into a cost-saving relationship with a particular company. This essay discusses such e-texts in terms of academic freedom, using excerpts from conversations with instructors who have used various e-texts in their classes. These instructors often take a pragmatic approach to the materials but fear losing control of what and how they teach.

Sacrificing Academic Freedom?

Imagine teaching the ideal class. Your small class of students is prepared to learn. They have the prerequisite skills to understand the content and complete the work, and they want to learn about the subject. Students have chosen your class because you are an expert in the field. You have an excellent reputation; students and colleagues respect and trust you. You know the best ways to teach to teach the content.

Enter reality: You are teaching an online section of a required class that's capped at one hundred, and 82.7 percent of the students who took it hated the class *before* it was put online. Or you're the main instructor for a huge undergraduate lecture, working with five TAs, and you need to make sure that they all teach the same thing. Or you have to crank out a bunch of publications and prep for a new class. Or you are a department head and you have a new group of adjuncts who will teach different sections of the required courses in your department.

A major publisher's rep just sent you an e-mail with an offer that seems too good to be true: he can come to your office for two hours and put together a custom-made course that feeds directly into your learning management system (LMS, such as Blackboard). All the lectures and assessments are created for you. For just a small additional cost to students when they buy the textbook, all assignments and quizzes will be "self-graded." The PowerPoint lectures are ready-made and loaded with "interactive materials" to increase student learning through games and instant feedback. Isn't that what today's students want, anyway?

Publisher-provided course materials are presented as a fix for reducing faculty workload and managing enrollment while also providing an engaging, technology-based experience for students. Might there be hidden costs to using them, though? The financial cost is passed to students, who have experienced an 82 percent rise in textbook costs since 2002,[1] which the General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office, GAO) attributed to the increases in technology and supplemental materials that accompany the textbook.[2] For faculty, the cost may not be so obvious—in fact, publisher-provided courses might offer financial benefits for instructors, departments, or the institution, such as more time for faculty or management of higher course enrollment. However, faculty might pay in other ways, such as giving up the freedom to choose, adapt, or customize course content.

In the spring of 2013, we conducted semistructured interviews with eight instructors at a midwestern university (referred to in this document as Instructors 1–8) in different academic areas across the university who had used various iterations of electronic publications in their classes. Our goal was to understand their experiences when teaching with these materials. One of the topics we discussed was academic freedom—what they thought they gained or lost by using various electronic publications or courses, what worked for them, and what did not. The interview data presented in this essay has been edited for clarity, and it is presented in the context of relevant literature related to the concepts discussed by the interviewees.

We will discuss variations of electronic textbooks—from the self-published electronic textbook to the "course-in-a-box" offered by a publisher, with self-graded quizzes and all—in light of the interviews that we conducted with faculty, concentrating on what the participants said about the realities of teaching in a university and the sacrifices that they might or might not make regarding academic freedom. We couched these conversations within the larger topic of "outsourcing education": Did these professors feel that they

cross a line when they adopt electronic courseware? Do the different electronic textbook options impinge on their voice or their ability to teach the subject as they think it should be taught? Such questions apply across the university—from English 101 to engineering courses, to both undergraduate and graduate education, as administrators look for new methods of savings in online education.

Variations of Electronic Textbooks

Many publishers now offer electronic textbook (or "e-textbook") options for students who are purchasing a textbook for a class. Students might have an option to buy an e-textbook in addition to the print textbook (purchased as a bundle); in other cases, students may buy either the e-textbook or its print counterpart. Sometimes, an e-book will be bundled with the print textbook and supplemental materials. The GAO[3] described four textbook options: a traditional textbook, a textbook with supplemental material, a textbook with an interactive system, or a customized textbook. As we found when speaking with local instructors, other options also exist in addition to publishers' e-textbook choices, such as open-source e-textbooks (which may be continuously updated by multiple authors) and self-published textbooks (which may include text as well as activities and multimedia).

Until recently, it was more common for instructors to select, prepare, and deliver customized course materials for each course. A number of factors, which we will describe below, have reduced instructors' influence in courses. One factor is that publisher-provided course materials are very accessible and easy to use. Jeffery Young called this model the "course-in-a-box." In such a package—a textbook with electronic textbook, course content, activities, and assessments—the instructor's role can be as simple as assigning content to students and letting the course run itself.[4] Faculty (or, in some cases, administrators) work with publishers to select specific materials, sometimes even customizing packages to fit their curriculum. However, they might find some limitations in the material or in their ability to customize the course. This creates a situation in which the instructor must work with publisher policies if he or she wishes to use the publisher's technology services. Instructors—and their intellectual guidance—are thus sacrificed (however inadvertently) to the financial goals of the corporate partner.

Publishers have become involved with department- and campus-level activities in other, less traditional ways. For example, representatives of Pearson PLC came to our institution to promote their marketing, admissions, learning analytics, and instructional development services. For a percentage of the profits, they would provide all of these educational services and technology to the university and eliminate the need for the institution to provide them locally. We will discuss this phenomenon in more detail below.

Can the partnerships and solutions offered by textbook publishers affect academic freedom? Michael Stein, Christopher Scribner, and David Brown describe a confluence of internal and external pressures that

have led to a diminished placement of traditional education in the university (writ large).[5] Some factors they list are for-profit institutions and technology's dominance in education amid the requirements of accrediting institutions and external assessments. They claim that students (especially nontraditional students) want skills and credentials rather than a liberal arts education. Such skills-based education is also promoted by some governmental entities in the form of competency-based learning and massive open online courses (MOOCs). This is a source of much tension in academia today, and the consequences of moving to a skills-based educational system are as yet unknown.

By many accounts, professors have lost sovereignty in the classroom. As Stein, Scribner, and Brown put it, "The professor as didact is increasingly replaced by the professor as projectionist. Whenever problems in education arise, be they real, virtual, or in some way manipulated, the markets develop solutions, sometimes to problems they themselves create. As has often happened in the past, technology is heralded as a 'magic bullet' responding to 'today's' student, who is said to be like no other."[6] The authors warn of a one-size-fits-all approach that makes accountability and reporting easier but limits individual freedom and creativity. They find the "annoyances" of external assessments particularly problematic: "When do mere annoyances become infringements? Perhaps when external assessment becomes the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes quality in the classroom. We are not alone in needing to satisfy demands that our 'product' meet preordained, measurable, and quantifiable results; it is simply again our turn."[7] Analytics provide quantifiable assessments of students and faculty for accreditation purposes, which might be particularly attractive to administrators.

We assert that the publisher-provided course is yet another infringement on academic freedoms, if used without serious consideration of long-term consequences. The "course-in-a-box" offers a solution to such problems as increased faculty workloads and student engagement in online courses. These courses can be adopted in very large lecture classes, though they might be assigned by the administration to ensure compliance with a prescribed curriculum or used to ensure uniformity for accreditation purposes.

Outsourcing

The professors we talked with were technologically savvy and experienced online educators, but they expressed qualms about the consequences of relegating instructional responsibility to any company. Some were much more wary than others. The interview data from which we draw our conclusions demonstrate some abject fears about losing choice should the administration assign a curriculum textbook or even a requirement to work with a specific publisher. For instance, Instructor 5 said, "I am not comfortable necessarily running my course the way [publishers] think I should run my course. Instead of setting up and

using a course on their site, I chose to use a Blackboard cartridge so I could pick and choose individual pieces that I wanted to use. This allowed me to keep tighter control over what my students could see, and I didn't have to worry about merging gradebooks. This means that I have to manually grade more of what my students turn in, but I consider that an important part of the job so I don't mind." Other instructors reiterated that academic freedom means more than being hardheaded in retaining choice; in essence, it equates to retaining their integrity.

At first linking outsourcing with the publisher-provided course materials may seem like a stretch, but a deeper look into the textbook publishers' expanding business shows that some of the larger companies, like Pearson, are moving toward (or already offering) partnerships with colleges and universities to provide services like admissions and recruitment. While a sole instructor working with a publisher to develop an e-textbook for a course does not necessarily constitute outsourcing, does this change when the instructor begins to use other services from the publisher, such as instructional design or development services? How about when an entire program partners with a publisher to help recruit students? Is it considered outsourcing when a campus develops contracts to control pricing and access to materials, such as the agreement between McGraw-Hill and Western Governors University,[8] or between McGraw-Hill and the University of Minnesota,[9] or between Pearson and Rutgers[10] (which was protested by Rutgers' graduate faculty senate)?[11] Such relationships can completely undermine what it means to be a professor at a university (though the instructional goals of teachers in for-profit or training schools might not be compromised).

Outsourcing is a not a new phenomenon. At its root, we can think of outsourcing as a consequence of modernization and specialization. Outsourcing refers to one organization seeking the services of another organization, where standards of service are determined through contracts. Sandra Braman describes outsourcing as an international norm where goods and services are exchanged through contractual relations with companies around the world.[12] For most states, goods are produced outside their borders and brought in through trade agreements and policy. Outsourcing, then, is not just a simple exchange of capital—it institutionalizes relationships.

A university might outsource a variety of products and services. We can think of this as a continuum. On one end of the continuum, all educational materials are prepared and taught locally to students who reside in buildings maintained by university employees. On the other end of the continuum, students are scattered throughout the world, taught by adjuncts without physical ties to their institution, using materials prepared by contracted companies.

Richard Bartem and Sherry Manning explain outsourcing in higher education: "In modern corporations, decisions are made every day about whether to make or buy, to purchase or lease, or to expand through customer growth or through corporate acquisition. Typically, these decisions have more to do with

return on investment and available capital than with simply getting bigger or preserving time-honored ways of doing things."[13] They continue, "Outsourcing allows colleges and universities to try new things, to test new products and services, to competitively price alternatives, to strengthen their own capabilities, to use other people's capital, and, most importantly, to concentrate on what they do best."[14] The university must maintain the upper hand in the relationship, however: the "culture of the business needs to serve the culture of the university," not vice versa.[15] Most universities enter into contracts with outside vendors to supply LMSs and other technologies to be used in the classroom because specialized companies have the time and expertise to develop (and improve) the software. People working for these companies understand universities and work with them, but at the same time universities must strive to maintain a balance in order to drive the relationship in favor of education rather than commerce. When does outsourcing undermine the culture of the university?

For Ronald Phipps and Jaime Merisotis, improving quality and reducing costs are the main criteria that influence the decision to outsource.[16] They describe the normalcy of outsourcing for large institutions, though these outsourced services were generally related to food service, laundry, or the bookstore. David Norris and Mark Olson also found that their survey participants would consider outsourcing these services but would not consider outsourcing instruction, research, and scholarship.[17] The key idea is that outsourcing should not interfere with the mission of the university, and traditionally, universities are different from other types of learning institutions. They develop thinkers and problem solvers who operate in the spirit of free inquiry. They go beyond training.

In a policy brief from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), Alene Russell describes the outsourcing of instruction as related to several trends: (1) competition from the for-profit sector, (2) students earning credits from multiple universities (especially through online programs), with their home institutions accepting those credits, and (3) the increased use of adjuncts and non-tenure-track faculty.[18] All of these trends point to a need for quality control standards, and enhanced e-texts can offer some measure of assurance.

In the AASCU policy brief, Russell offers arguments for and against the outsourcing of instruction as a partnership, presenting three explanations of why a public institution would consider such an arrangement. She explains that public-private partnerships can (1) support an institution developing new online or specialized programs, (2) increase markets and expand enrollments, and (3) improve student success and retention, increase enrollments, and reduce costs. On the counter side of this, factors such as control, quality, performance, and revenue-sharing are less clear in outsourced relationships.

Embanet is one of several companies supporting colleges and universities that wish to

outsource their online programs. In 2010 Pearson purchased Embanet, which now provides online learning services to over twenty universities, including the University of Florida, Boston University, and Northeastern University.[19] Its website states that these services include market research, program funding, student recruitment, course design and development, curriculum support, student retention, and other services that may make an online program more competitive.

Marc Parry presents an overview of services provided by companies like Embanet and describes colleges that pulled back after involvement in these partnerships.[20] For instance, Boston University reduced services with Embanet because of "academic principles and high price," finding instructional design to be more affordable and less frustrating when provided by campus instructional designers. One administrator said, "We couldn't let an outside party be responsible for the quality of our instruction—that was just too problematic on a long-term basis. We didn't want to be dependent on a for-profit company in terms of our academic reputation."[21]

Lawrence Baines and Leigh Chiarelott describe the attraction of outsourcing for many small institutions, which may have increased during the recession.[22] "Although a cost-benefit analysis of contracts dramatically favors the corporation, the institution is usually guaranteed a small profit, which is granted at minimal risk, a godsend in the current economic climate. Theoretically, the university makes money on thousands of new students who never would have enrolled without the marketing intervention of the corporation."[23] After reviewing two cases from colleges involved in outsourced programming, Baines and Chiarelott warn other instructors of the inflexible rules, loss of authentic learning experiences, and profiteering of partnering with an online learning corporation.

A related phenomenon that demonstrates leveraging outside expertise in the university is the rise of the MOOCs from high-ranking and Ivy League universities. Proponents say the MOOCs have the potential to equalize education—they give students at state universities and colleges access to an Ivy League education. Though MOOCs were originally not credit-bearing, there have been recent moves to grant credit for them. We can see the political push for this kind of outsourcing in California Senate Bill 520, which allows students to receive credit for taking courses from other institutions in California. There was fierce opposition to the bill; detractors felt that its passage would disrupt their system, encouraging students to seek credit from private startups and other public universities. Such a bill relies on partnerships with technology providers, which causes concern among instructors because it could reduce the number of academic jobs, and surrender control over the credit-awarding process.[24] Tamar Lewin wrote that if SB 520 passed (which it did not), "it would be the first time that state legislators have instructed public universities to grant credit for courses that were not their own—including those taught by a private vendor, not by a college or university."[25] Such political pressure pointedly leads to academic freedom issues. One prominent example involved protests

among San Jose University's faculty when they were told to adopt Michael Sandel's online "Justice" course (which was *not* criticized for content). Protestors argued for their right to choose to use these materials, rather than be required to do so by administrators.[26] Is using a MOOC outsourcing education? Andrew Valls, writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, claims that "using a MOOC for a hybrid course is like adopting a textbook. You can use all of it, or just parts. You can use its exercises and tests, or not. You can still choose what to emphasize in the classroom, and still make your own assignments."[27] Again, whether or not it is outsourcing depends on the level of control that the instructor maintains in how various components are used.

We also found reticence among faculty members; when discussing e-texts and their role in MOOCs, one instructor noted that MOOCs are similar to the courses offered by publishers and identified the instruction in these courses as introductory and not appropriate for more advanced courses. Participant 8 said, "I have been following some of the articles about MOOCs. I do think that is something that can have a huge impact on how we teach students, so personally I am quite optimistic about that; however, I checked several websites for these courses. I feel like there are big differences between the introductory courses and advanced courses. They are appropriate for introductory level courses." More advanced courses may require more customized instruction and course materials. In relationship to academic freedom, the choice of when and how to use MOOCs or other prepared course material should be left to the instructor.

Academic Freedom and Instructional Goals

As we have noted, instructors can choose from a wide range of e-textbooks. Assigning a standalone e-text, really is not much different from assigning a print textbook with regards to educational goals and academic freedom. Textbooks with electronic course modules allow instructors to use tests aligned with the reading material and offer multimedia content. In an ideal world, the instructor's freedom regarding what to use is protected. Some (but not all) content providers allow professors to pick which sections of the readings they want to use and to intersperse their own content (written or multimedia), creating an online course experience that is tailored to their own understanding of the material and learning goals. One instructor with whom we discussed this described positive experiences with publishing companies regarding choices offered by the modules model:

> I often hear instructors say that do not use an entire text because they don't agree with the author—maybe there are a couple chapters they don't agree with or they don't find it relevant to the course and they will require students to purchase a text because some of it is good. One of the things that I like is that if I don't want three of those chapters, I can customize the book and not make the

> students pay for that. I think that's a huge advantage to e-texts. Also, [Company X] will allow you to combine several authors in the text.

Similarly, another instructor described using quizzes for homework, along with the PowerPoints that came with the e-text. She added, however, that it is very important for her to customize everything: "Just recently we have been able to customize homework assignments. All the content is customizable. There are areas of the course where we interject publisher content, and we are able to modify and add slides." Some instructors, though, described a situation in which they were unable to customize the materials in a way that met their instructional goals. It depends on the company. Some companies have platforms that allow extensive customization, while others offer a package deal. "I said, 'Well, can I à la carte? Can I pick and choose what I want?' And they didn't even have pricing available on that. They said, 'We're going to have to get back to you on that,' because that's not the way that they structure their pricing. It was all or nothing. . . . There was really not a lot of flexibility to pick and choose." Did this affect her academic freedom, though? In this case, it did not. She was free to choose a different product or not to use an e-text at all. Maintaining the right to choose clearly puts the institution's educational mission ahead of the company's interests.

Monopolies

Yet another problem with the merging of education and technology is the monopolistic tendency of the largest companies. Robert McChesney explains: "As killer applications have emerged, new digital industries have gone from competitive to oligopolistic to monopolistic at breakneck speed."[28] Universities attempting to educate ever more students feed the "demand-side economies of scale"; furthermore, supporting the "largest firm in an industry increases its attractiveness to consumers by an order of magnitude as it gets a greater market share, [making] it almost impossible for competitors with declining shares to remain attractive or competitive."[29] The largest firms are able to invest the most money in research and development, creating ever more demand for their products.

McChesney provides a philosophical overview of what seems to be a pragmatic decision: choosing a product or platform. When a large university decides to support a particular platform, it effectively could help build a monopoly. Another aspect is the surveillance (also called learning analytics) offered by the systems that might further deepen professors' (or administrators') dependence on the system. While there is a danger in building monopolies, it does make more sense to reduce risk by forging ties with a technology company that the institution knows is expanding and improving, rather than one that is less supported. Putting classes, and especially programs, online is a big monetary investment. Everyone—from students to instructors to local support staff (when available)—must learn to use the tools. Adopting course materials that fit into the larger technological schema produces seamless presentations, which further entrenches dependency on e-

texts and related products. However, once a course is set up it, it is scalable—more students can be taught for less cost. Proprietary software companies obtain patents that enable seamless integration with e-textbooks, which unfortunately can stifle rather than encourage innovation. McChesney reminds us that "the profitability of the digital giants is centered on establishing proprietary systems for which they control access and the terms of the relationship, not the idea of an Internet as open as possible."[30]

Several of the instructors in our study discussed problems with the university's relationship with Blackboard. They felt locked into the platform because it is deeply entrenched in the learning technologies of the university. However, at this point they did not feel threatened by the publishers per se. For instance, one participant said, "I am not in favor of one publisher fitting an entire organization. . . . I don't see faculty ever accepting that as the norm on campus. I think we give up so much in the way of control when we do that. I do think that in the future publishers will have products that entire disciplines in a university may adopt."

Online Education: Opportunities and Opportunists

Andrew Feenburg writes that "in the late 1900's corporate strategists, state legislators, top university administrators, and so-called futurologists lined up behind a vision of online education based on automation and deskilling. Their goal was to replace (at least for the masses) face-to-face teaching by professional faculty with an industrial product, infinitely reproducible at decreasing unit cost."[31] This is a particularly grim view of the possibilities inherent in the scalable and easily reproducible classroom: the professor replaced by a corporate voice. Similarly, the "course-in-a-box" concept leads us to consider the implications of multiple instructors' reusing the same course content at different institutions. David Noble had this warning for online instructors: "Students want the genuine face-to-face education they paid for, not a cyber-counterfeit."[32]

Some of the companies, like McGraw-Hill's Connect, have created systems in which instructors can create their own materials and link to other outside material (for instance, from MIT OpenCourseware), demonstrating that the e-text and supplemental materials do not have to be used as a complete package. An instructor could, therefore, spend quite a bit of time developing a customized online course around some publisher-supplied material, which is no different from a regular course with a textbook, or a course pack, picking and choosing the content that reflects the instructor's point of view. This significant time investment is lost, however, if the platform goes belly-up or if the university decides to adopt a different system. It might not be possible to transfer all of the invested time (including tests, videos, etc.) to a new platform if it is on a proprietary system.

Technological convergence is implicit in this discussion, but it merits more explicit exploration. Curtis Bonk praises the open web's educational possibilities with relentless enthusiasm, describing one class

in which the students read free online materials, watched videos of a luminary in the subject area, then talked to him "using a cheap Webcam connection and Adobe Connect Pro." He continues, "Money, though still important, is no longer the prevailing determinant of the players in the educational dance."[33] The kinds of technologies that Bonk refers to are freely available on the open web (with the exception of Adobe products for which Skype could easily substitute). Proprietary LMSs, in contrast, bring convergent technologies and content together under one roof. These stark differences illustrate opposite views of content ownership and intellectual freedom in online education—one is completely open, one is completely closed. Educators can choose which route is most appropriate.

The instructors we interviewed are attracted to new and innovative publisher-provided technologies. For example, Instructor 5 described the value of enhancing her class with learning objects that she would be unable to create herself: "Some of it was convenience and some of it was 'What a great idea!' I use the assessments out of convenience for reading quizzes, but finding mistakes and having to triple check everything has been a pain. The animations and animation quizzes provide an alternate learning strategy that I don't have the time or expertise to develop on my own, and the students respond very well to them." Publishers tend to have the reputation of leading technology in education, but not all instructors trust their dominance. For instance, Instructor 3 said, "I see some advantages to constantly looking at what publishers are doing, I think they tend to be on the leading edge and I don't think that hurts us at all, but I can't see getting in bed with publishers and the revenue-sharing model. I can't see how that is really going to benefit us."

Revisit "the Ideal Classroom"

It is true that technology has changed the classroom, and that many pressures have been exerted on professors by accrediting bodies, college ranking reports, and so on. It is true that technology offers many ways to teach more students at a distance, and to capture a picture of what is going on in the classroom for reviewers. The relationship perpetrated by technology, however, might have negative effects on academics. Should the publishers define learning outcomes? Should publishers determine how we assess students?

Clearly, not all publisher materials are problematic. We are not advocating a return to print textbooks. The main goal of this essay is to champion instructor involvement and choice. Some instructors do prefer to avoid any publisher-prepared material, however, because of the cost of e-texts for students and in order to maintain complete control over the content. For instance, one instructor with whom we spoke took a stand against industry practices by creating his own e-text: "My big motivation for getting into WebWork and exploring open resources was because I felt like textbooks were too expensive, that the big publishers especially are really bad for higher education and bad for students typically. And I didn't want to be a part of

it." The main idea that we got from the instructors we talked with is that though they approach e-texts differently, they wanted to ensure that they retained a voice; they wanted to maintain control over how the class materials were presented. Instructor 5, who used publisher materials extensively, said, "I feel some of the materials overreach an instructor's prerogative. . . . [The students] know when they are being fed a predetermined curriculum that anyone can teach. Although I teach online, I work very hard to develop a relationship with my students so that they know the course isn't being taught by a computer." In other words, she knows that students will not stand for a cyber-counterfeit in place of a real human.

Academic freedom is at the heart of university education. Maintaining this freedom requires that we be vigilant for infringements. Technology offers compelling relief from the "annoyances" of modern university work, and it offers benefits to teaching increasingly distant students. However, it might also be a Trojan horse, bringing hidden and multilayered problems such as monopolies and surveillance to the culture of the university. Maintaining freedom does not mean allowing rogue professors to dominate the culture; it means allowing the essence of inquiry to flourish, which can only be achieved by requiring subject expertise and human intervention in the classroom.

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[32] David Noble, "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education," *First Monday* 3, no. 1 (1998), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/569/490.
[33] Curtis Bonk, *The World Is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 385–86.