Textbook Prices: What is the Best Solution?

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Most college students, when they reach into their wallets, usually find them empty. One reason for their empty wallets is because they have to spend a lot of money on textbooks for their courses. Textbooks are expensive for numerous reasons. Most students don't realize that even gas prices affect textbook prices. It costs a lot of money to ship the books, store the books on trains, and to pay for gas that gets the books to the bookstores. In this paper I will review the causes of the increase in textbook prices and show that the virtual production of textbooks will lead to lower costs for students and a better educational experience.

Textbooks prices seem to be increasing more and more every year. In an article on textbook prices, Julie Nicklin says, "There is a lot of controversy surrounding the prices book publishers charge college bookstores" (A41). Ten years ago an English textbook cost twenty dollars in California; now, the average cost for an English textbook has reached $57 ("News in Brief: A state Capitals Roundup" 16). This shows how much prices have increased in the past ten years. The writer, Ian Wallace says "a new edition of a textbook appearing every two or three semesters is probably the main cause of increasing prices, and also explains why so few textbooks are recycled at second-hand bookshops" (11). Even though it is cheaper to buy books online that it is in university bookstores, the savings are not significant (Date 18). Bookstores want to sell new editions because they will receive more money from new textbooks than recycled ones. Wallace cites a University of Southern Illinois report which found that the cost of a regular textbook more than tripled between 1990 and 2002. Gary Shapiro of Follett

Corporation, which runs 680 stores on 550 higher-education campuses nationwide, puts the average price of a textbook today at $72.83 ("Penny Pinching 101" 9+).

According to Scott Lecce, cost depends on the organization, pictures, colors and the type of paper used in the textbooks. "The price has been rising rapidly as publishers have updated content, printed books on better paper, added color and graphics and, in some cases, packaged them with compact discs" ("Penny pinching 101" 9+). Textbooks are primarily marketed to teachers rather than students (Wallace 11). The publishers make the books as appealing as possible in order to get the professor's attention. It seems that the publishers are after money, instead of better education for students. If the professors like the edition they will use it for their class, and get their students to buy it. "It is true that some texts need to be updated but, in most cases, a new edition is published simply to maintain profits and prevent earlier editions being recycled" (Wallace 11). Basically, each year publishers find a better way to improve their books so they won't have to compete with the used book market. Other strategies that publishers use are, "replacing hardbacks with paperbacks; printing slimmer, two-volume sets (one for each semester), or using sleeker texts with CD-ROMS" (Murr 10). In "Students Search for Alternatives as Textbook Prices Rise," Joan Wagner explains how other factors play a role in textbook prices, like "Author royalties, administrative fees, pre-taxes, shipping expenses, publisher income and college store personnel and operations."

Wallace says, "Publishers claim the largest share of proceeds, with 64 per cent of the cost covering the publication, marketing, profit and taxes" (11). He goes on to report, "The author receives 11.4 per cent and the bookseller 24.6 per cent covering salaries, administration, freight rent and profit."

Publishers market books to teachers because they are the ones who have the final say in which textbook the students have to purchase for their class. Publishers include desktop copies, instructor manuals, and test question data banks, CD-ROMs, websites and power point presentations of the teaching materials (Wallace 11). These extra items make the textbook even more expensive, yet even more appealing to the teacher.

If nothing is done to lower the textbook prices, students will stop buying textbooks or they may even need to drop out of college if they can't afford the books because they will be failing their classes. Wallace mentions "…at [the] tertiary level[s], only 37 per cent of students purchased textbooks" (11). Laura Nakoneczny, along with others, acknowledges that "faculty believes that having textbooks correlate with student success" (Thomson A09). She goes on to say that the faculty doesn't realize that more students "are just saying no to purchasing required books" (A09). Students may not choose a certain major because of how much the textbooks cost for that particular major. It is ironic how textbooks determine which classes' students take, instead of the classes the students take determining the textbooks they use. For example, biology majors pay more for books compared to business majors (Moore). Biology majors pay more because they have more pictures in their books and they have to buy lab manual and atlases. To make things worse, students barely get any money back for their used textbooks when they are putting out so much money to buy a new textbook.

The best solution to this problem is to produce books virtually. This is where students will get codes for their books and they will be able to access their books online. This will cut down on the cost of textbooks, since there won't be any shipping and handling fees since the books will be computer accessible. The gas prices will no longer be an issue either. Virtual books

will cut the cost of textbooks significantly, leaving the students with more money to pay for other things.

Virtual books aren't printed on paper so that will save the students a lot of money too. A lot of teachers feel that putting textbooks online will lower the costs of books, Van Reidhead, associate anthropology professor, says "I think we need to learn how to re-engage this shorter-attention-span group of people" ("Penny Pinching 101" 9+). Van Reidhead goes on to say that "I have a sense that we are losing the attention of these younger people by being too book-oriented" ("Penny Pinching 101" 9+). Thomson shows how re-engaging students has already been put into effect, as a lot of professors require fewer books and more online learning (A09). She continues, by noting that some teachers like the web for the flexibility it gives them and the ability to create links to topics of special interest that come up in class (A09). In "Color Combinations that Scream," Nancy Hitchcock states her belief that "college kids might have grown accustomed to neon colors and flashing visuals in video games and on MTV and the Internet, but they might not be used to neon colors flashing at them from their textbooks" (68). That is why it is a great idea to have textbooks online; students are used to video games and MTV and to make learning like their social life would perhaps make leaning more fun and educational for students.

Erin Burt says students arriving this fall at the University of Phoenix will be the first textbookless college students (20). She continues by pointing out that "students in selected programs will get Microsoft's e-book reader software. For less than the cost of a textbook, they will pay a per-course fee to get access to interactive materials and up-to-date texts online. The software allows students to search, highlight, bookmark, print and even doodle" (Burt 20).

Some publishers may argue that students need tactile learning. "Tactile learners learn best through their sense of touch, such as using their hands and fingers. They learn best by writing, drawing, taking notes, using hands-on manipulative, and involving their emotions and feelings while learning " (www.readininstruction.com). However, Gadt-Johnson says, "The results of the study suggest that students with a high preference for tactile learning can be further distinguished from those with a low preference based on eight other variables" (581). She goes on to say, "This implies that students have additional learning preferences that should be considered when developing appropriate instructional methods." Students are already computer oriented. Students won't be able to highlight on the screen like they do in the books. Clicking and typing are just a different form of tactile learning that will get the same results as highlighting a book or turning the pages.

Publishers, along with teachers and professors, may argue that students needed printed material instead of online material because the books create a better contrast between the words and paper, which is easier on the eyes instead of online material. In "Object proximity, Poor Lighting, Glare All Factor into Eye Strain," Medsker believes that "printed materials have better contrast for a person's eyes than a computer screen or TV screen." The text on computers; however, have contrast too. A website may have blue for its background and black for its primary text color. "Eye strain happens when the muscles tighten after doing a task such as reading, working at the computer or watching television for an extended period of time, he goes on to say that "eye strain is prevalent among college students." Medsker believes that eye strain has three main causes: "first, having the eyes focused on a fixed object that is close to the eyes for an extended period of time, second, poor lighting, and third, glare." Medsker goes on to say that "Eyes are designed to shift focus from objects that are near to those that are far away."

Whether it is a book or a computer screen, they both are culprits for eyestrain. "A staff physician at the Iowa State University Student Health Center said "Eye strain is not just necessarily prevalent just among students, but also in people who look at computer screens or into microscopes" (Medsker). Computer screens cause the same problems as microscopes; they are both learning tools that are necessary for a good education. Whether it is a textbook or a textbook online, both pose eye problems. The solution to this problem, whether it be textbooks or computer screens is "taking a break ever 15 minutes to look off into the distance and shift the focus to avoid the strain" (Medsker).

Another problem with virtual textbooks is that not everyone owns a computer. The only solution to this problem is that college campuses will need to provide enough computer labs for each student to use in order to access these books online.

Textbooks and virtual books both create the same problems. In the same way that the pages in the books bend, the cd's can break too. Virtual books have the same amount of problems as hardback books, but virtual textbooks are cheaper. In "Price Competition for Textbooks," Gallagher says, "Online stores are enticing students with price cuts, low (and sometimes no) shipping charges, and an impressive inventory of used books" (46). This creates a lot of competition between online bookstores and university bookstores (Gallagher 46).

Switching to virtual textbooks will have a huge economical effect because publishers will lose a lot of money; however, publishers are already losing money because students are photocopying books, sharing books, or using the library copies. "Replicating copyrighted textbook material without permission, and distributing it to more than one person is a violation of U.S (sic) copyright law, U.S. Copyright Office representative Peter Vankevich said" (Mayer).

Kristy Mayer says it best, "Cash-strapped students are finding creative ways to avoid paying full price for . . . required textbooks." Justin Apenbrinck, a student, shows how sharing a book can save a student a lot of money. He says, "The book was, like, about $90, so we just decided to split the cost, he says." He continues that the arrangement works because they take the class on different days (Thomson). Some students use the library copy of the book in order to save money. In Thomson's article, "Put off by Cost, Many Students Aren't Buying Textbooks," Kate Miller, another Washington University student, "Uses the library to the extent possible, reading texts that professors have put on reserve there or checking them out. She calculates that by doing so, she spent only about $100 buying books this semester."

Publishers will still lose money if students are renting textbooks too. For instance, some college students came up with another plan for saving money. "A few colleges—Southern Illinois University at Edwards and Southeast Missouri State University, among them—offer students the option of renting their textbooks. Southern Illinois charges undergraduates $6.35 a credit hour—to a maximum of $69.75—per semester for textbook rental as part of their mandatory fees" (Thomson A09). Southern Illinois shows how renting textbooks is an effective way for saving money. "Students said… up-front payment[s] gives them an incentive to get their books. The University's rental service distributed more than 63,000 books last semester. That worked out to more than six books for each of the University's approximately 10,000 part-time and full time undergraduates. But the fee doesn't cover workbooks, lab books, study guides or any books on which students write or from which they tear pages. Students must buy those for about $30 each" (Thomson A09).

If students started using virtual textbooks, these organizations would be put out of business, but the students would be saving more money than the amount they were saving from

renting textbooks. Thomson comes up with another solution for students to save money on textbooks, he says, "At most colleges, students can save money by buying used books and by reselling their books to the campus books store when they are through with them. But students question the economics of a system that, they say, saves them only about 25 percent when they buy used and pays them less than half of the original price when they sell used." Students won't feel angry after getting less than half of their money back when they sell their books back if campuses switched to virtual textbooks. "… Southern Illinois student Justin Horton ran into a different hitch trying to sell a used textbook. The bookstore refused to buy it back, because a new edition was coming out. He says he hasn't bought a textbook since" (Thomson A09). With virtual textbooks students will no longer have to feel frustrated with selling books and not getting nearly enough money back for these books. Hane, explains how "net library's Meta Text division will create electronic versions of Houghton Mifflin College Division texts and, beginning in the fall of 2001 semester, provide college students and instructors with access to electronic textbooks through Mets Text's interactive, Web- based learning platform" (36). Virtual textbooks are helpful to professors because they can build online courses syllabi, manage class rosters, annotate text, and make class announcements (Hane 36). Students benefit too by being able to search, navigate, annotate, highlight [on the screen with the mouse], and bookmark their online text (Hane 36).

It is important to find the best way for students to learn. Virtual textbooks may prove to be better learning tools than traditional textbooks. O'Keefe points out that "a series of online calculus courses, for example, provide students with the ability to solve equations, plot the results, and see the answers displayed graphically." It is worth putting textbooks online. Even though they have the same problems as hardback books, virtual textbooks will be cheaper. The

net amount of money that students will save from having virtual textbooks is greater than if they continued to buy books in the bookstore. Virtual textbooks will cut down on more cost than having books sold in bookstores. The main reason for this decrease in cost is the fact that students won't have to pay for the books to be transported to their school. Additionally, textbooks are boring and don't have action; virtual textbooks give the students a new view on education. If publishers can make virtual textbooks more appealing to students, then maybe learning will be more appealing to students as well. Virtual textbooks provide more room for improvement than hardback books because of improving technology. Perhaps one day virtual textbooks will replace textbooks. Romano says it best, "Electronic book technology is advancing rapidly, with better screen resolution and longer battery life" (74). Virtual textbooks will be able to be improved year after year because of increased technology advances.