TEXTBOOK PUBLISHERS IN A NETWORKED WORLD

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Textbook publishing houses, like many other businesses, are scrambling to stay relevant in a world increasingly inter-connected by computers, modems and the Internet. Yet conventional wisdom aside, their transition into the networked world – by what means and with what level of success – has yet to be systematically researched. Also lacking quantified answers are the important questions of the receptiveness of students and professors to the textbook publishers' forays outside of their traditional ink-and-paper boundaries, and whether their new-product innovations really improve education.

This paper attempts to lay groundwork for future research of textbook publisher initiatives to secure a pivotal role in the burgeoning field of online learning. And, as often is the case with exploring emergent phenomenon, it draws upon press accounts of publishers' efforts to use the Internet, and its World Wide Web graphical interface, to position themselves for corporate growth, profit – and survival – in a networked world.

ADAPTING TO LIFE WITH THE WEB

Three major textbook publishing and distribution trends appear ascendant at present. First, publishers are silencing expensive printing presses to post supplemental textbook materials on the Web. They also are no longer content with printing textbooks; they now offer online courses and full degree programs. Third, electronic booksellers are chasing the once exclusive clientele of traditional college bookstores by opening virtual stores on the Web.

Web as a Venue for Supplemental Textbook Materials. That textbook publishers are posting Web sites is not particularly noteworthy. Many brick-and-mortar companies are homesteading the Web to primarily promote traditional products, and facilitate product ordering and customer service. What makes the publishers' sites arguably unique, however, are their innovative uses beyond merely digitizing traditional textbooks and study guides.

For one, a number of publishers, Wiley, Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, International Thomson Publishing, and Prentice Hall among them, are banking on the Internet's technological capability to hold time at bay – to keep textbooks safe from the age-old problem of rapidly falling out of date (Mendels, 1999a). They are hoping that the expense of printing revised textbooks can be delayed, if not avoided altogether, by publishing new, must-include subject-matter material online. Internet "addresses" published in the printed-paper texts direct students and educators to these virtual chapters.

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Such supplemental materials are not limited to textbook revisions (Murphy, 1998). Publishers also are coupling their "dead tree" textbooks to Webdelivered lesson plans for educators and interactive exercises for students. Some publishers even are offering to tame the paperwork of teaching by providing educators with Web-based "course management systems" that automate student-performance tracking.

Web as a Venue for Moving Beyond Textbooks. It used to work like this: publishers provide the content (textbooks), while colleges and universities provide the venue (classrooms), expertise (teaching faculty) and audience (students) for its consumption. But in today's networked world, the publishers are angling for a bigger piece of the pie. They want to become broad-product "learning companies," rather than mere publishing houses (Mendels, 1999b).

To make this transition, a number of publishers are gearing up to move into the consumption part of the education equation through the provision of courses and degree programs online. Examples are the Concord University School of Law by Kaplan Educational Centers, and the planned Harcourt University Project, for which textbook publisher Harcourt Inc. envisions an initial enrollment of up to 10,000 students sitting for 120 virtual courses.

Web as a Venue for Competing with E-tailers. College bookstores are the traditional distribution nodes for textbook publishers. However, bookstores are being given a run for their money – and for the student market – by electronic retailers, or "e-tailers," that are leveraging on the technology of the networked world (Mendels, 1998; Guernsey, 1999). Discounts and crowd-free virtual stores are the chief attractions.

A number of traditional college bookstores are fighting back, however, by establishing a cyber-presence of their own (Mendels, 1998; Guernsey, 1999). Their national association has joined the fray with an ad campaign against online-only textbook sellers (Blumenstyk, 1999).

UPSIDE AND DOWNSIDE OF THE NETWORKED WORLD

Posting supplementary materials on their Web sites undoubtedly benefits publishers in terms of cost; it is cheaper to upload than to physically print. Adapting their products to the networked world also gives publishers an edge over competitors who are not accommodating educators' yearnings to bring the networked world within the four walls of the classroom. It also has promotional value: material provided solely on the Web could whet consumers' appetites for purchasing its traditional, printed companion.

There clearly is plenty of upside. Indeed, Bosley (1999), for one, finds that students believe their educational experience is enhanced by computer-mediated communication, of which online coursework material is an example.

But there also is tremendous potential downside. Bosley, in what publishers could read as a "proceed with caution" sign, also finds that students enjoy the traditional education experience – with its classroom interactions and portable printed textbooks – and would not wish it replaced by Web-posed texts and online classes. It is a feeling that has currency with educators, who are

concerned about the quality and rigor of the kind of learning-by-Web that many textbook publishers now are practicing (Hara & Kling, 1999; Mendels, 1999b).

The risk of turning traditional clients (schools and educators) into competitors by getting into the degree-granting business, as well as the immediacy of buying a shelved text rather than waiting for its delivery by mail, are obstacles that publishers face as they experiment with their new online business models.

And there is the generally under-studied question of whether the current configurations of Web-posted educational materials truly enhance learning – whether hyperlinked and multimedia-augmented online content is a better learning tool than the tried and true printed-page textbook.

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