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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation -- "Seeing the World Through New Eyes..."

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As I listened to the breathless presentations, pronouncements, and endorsements during the announcement of the **iBook** platform for textbooks, I was beset by a conflicted reaction. As someone who has spent a fair amount of time thinking about those places in education where technology and pedagogy intersect, I found it laudable that such energy and apparently serious corporate buy-in from notable publishers was "front and center."

But I couldn't escape the painful impression, accented by repeated cringes, brought about by the sheer saturated hype and level of hubris on display — seemingly unconsciously, but if not, then representing a depth of marketing cynicism rarely approached outside of our four-year presidential election cycle accompanied by its never-ending campaign cycle.

If something truly revolutionizes the entire fabric of how teaching — and (emphasis mine) LEARNING actually occur, my guess is we'll find out about it by seeing it play out in our environment in an emergent fashion. I doubt such things are usefully announced in advance, and I doubly-doubt it when the announcement is made by the maker of whatever piece of shiny whizbangery is the one making the assertion.

At the same time, we really need innovation, a turning over of the soil, a fresh approach to these things. This is to be applauded. But why, oh, why must it arrive in the form of a proprietary platform: one that looks, for all the world, like an attempt to seize the mechanisms of content creation, content distribution, and content consumption, and bind them all together into one inescapable package? This, I think, is to be resisted, tooth and nail, every time it rears its sinister, self-serving, self-congratulatory head.

We're already too close to a monoculture in the textbook industry as it is. When a particular textbook becomes, for a period of time, THE way we teach a particular subject, I think we're navigating murky waters. Certainly such things change, and old texts are overthrown for new, although not always for reasons of pure academic merit. The examples of books accepted or rejected for their inclusion of a particular point of view, one that is either controversial, in vogue, or out of vogue, puts the lie to the idea that we're trying to help our students learn how to think. Why would we permit ideas to be kept from students? Why must we simplify nuanced subject matter until an entire generation can think only in terms of binary status for the values they slap on as labels upon ideas — this idea GOOD, that idea BAD? And still again, the converse is true as well — and again we mustn't oversimplify, but already too much of our teaching has become so entirely permeated with moral relativity and debatable moral equivalencies that we're in danger of creating a lasting era in which the concepts of GOOD and BAD are thought to be all entirely dependent upon how you look at things. Is that really what we think? Have we decided that this is what we want to teach?

Now, what has this to do with technology — specifically **Apple's** technology? Well, I'm sorry to say, but I'm left with the impression that this company does not simply want to be a player in this space, or contribute to the development of rich and widely-usable innovation in the creation, maintenance, and distribution of educational content — I think these guys want to OWN this space.

Fortunately, the road, if we take just a moment to glance back and survey it, is littered with the rotting corpses of things that could be manufactured, sold, and most importantly, BOUGHT, all of which were going to revolutionize this or that. I'm not being cynical about the capacity for technology, or new ideas of any kind, to bring about change — in methods, means, the resulting "world view" — these shifts can be enormously significant. But it doesn't happen every day, and it doesn't happen because some marketing arm wants to position a product or a platform as the inescapable conclusion, the answer to every question, the "thing we've all actually been waiting for and thank goodness it's finally here!" It's when you hear that that you'd better double check that your wallet is in a safe pocket, because somebody's about to try and pick it. "May I swipe your card?" "No!"

Really deep change is often an unintended consequence — I'm not saying necessarily a good or bad consequence, but rather that things often produce outcomes unforeseen by the designers, marketers, and adopters. And sometimes it takes a while for such things to become apparent. We all know the Internet changed education. Fine. But so did the Interstate Highway system. So did the light bulb. So did acid-processed, pulp-based paper.

If we want to look for the trace indications that something is changing the way we do things, we have to look not at the "answers to all our needs" spoon-fed to us by the guys with the factories, but rather, we find these traces by asking questions. The wisest guy I ever knew liked to say, "A good question beats a good answer any day."

Back in the early 1990s I was administering a learning support center at a private university located quite far north and quite far west. We had a "state of the art Computer Lab" (didn't everybody?) made up of a couple of dozen **Macintosh** SEs and a few of the newer **Mac** "Classics." The whole thing was networked with AppleTalk, and we ran everything into a genuine **Apple** LaserWriter. This was really cool stuff.

But as I would wander the rows of machines, getting kids down out of various trees they'd have gotten themselves stuck in, I remember wondering one day about those little screens, and what a different view they presented to the student compared to the fresh, blank sheet of Corrasable Bond I used to be confronted with in my Olivetti.

Could the size of the screen, I wondered, the number and width of lines it could comfortably display at any given moment, possibly be having an effect upon the way our students formulated the expression of their ideas? Two-thirds of the way down a sheet of typing paper, you could glance up several paragraphs at what you'd said — not right before what you were saying now, but a little further back, leading up to whatever you were about to say now.

On the little screen, sure, you could scroll up and get a sense of what was up there, but the view of the document as a whole was now presented through a tiny window that absolutely prohibited you from seeing what you really had until you printed the pages. Even as WYSIWYG was touted as the newest, greatest thing, we were, in fact, NOT seeing what we were getting; our view was severely truncated.

Well, I never did that formal study. I can't prove anything. But don't you notice that as screens and keyboards have shrunk to the size sported on the typical SmartPhone, we've started to run into teachers having to tell students, "No, I'm sorry, but **Lincoln** never "went ;^p" and **Douglas** never replied, "ROTFLMAO!"

Let me try this: we buried our football coach recently. The crowd lining the procession route was eight or nine deep in places. Our entire community was involved. It was traumatic on all sorts of levels — in ways complicated enough to make even our finest orators struggle to capture, contain, and articulate it in speech or the written word.

The front page of our student paper was nearly half-filled with a single photograph. It showed **Joe's** deep blue hearse as it crept forward past the gates at College and Allen. It was my wife who noticed it while looking at that photograph, and remarked on it.

There were hundreds of people visible in the photo, and almost every person — not each, but nearly each, was holding a cell phone aloft. And their gaze was not upon the hearse mak-
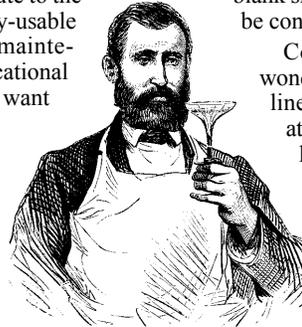
Under the Hood — E-textbooks and the Library

Column Editor: **Xan Arch** (Collection Development Librarian, Reed College Library) <xanadu@reed.edu>

I met with our campus technology team recently to discuss eBooks. The meeting didn't have a set purpose, other than discussing electronic content at the college and sharing information about library and IT projects that relate to eBooks. However, the meeting was eye-opening to me, as I realized that the technologies and products that the library uses for e-content are very different from those that are marketed to our campus technology department and those differences will make it difficult to achieve continuity for users in e-texts.

Our campus IT is interested in student and faculty access to electronic content for courses, and they believe that campus use is trending heavily toward mobile devices, particularly **iPads**. Their goal is for students and faculty to have a single place to read and annotate electronic course content. Accordingly, they are investigating a number of e-reader and textbook management software packages for **iPad**. **Apple's** recent release of **iBooks2** is one interesting entry into this market, and there are companies appearing all over the place that are trying to fill this niche. These companies focus on the campus textbook market and provide a place to purchase, read, and annotate that material.

I was surprised to find that I hadn't heard of these products, though they are involved in hosting and supplying e-content, just like the eBook providers used by the library market. Some of the products mentioned were OpenClass, Kno, Inkling, and CourseLoad. OpenClass is a free product provided by textbook giant, Pearson. It's primarily a course management system that will soon provide the ability to purchase and read eBooks from **Ingram's** VitalSource. Kno, CourseLoad, and Inkling are platforms for purchasing and reading textbooks, with features like social tools and image manipulation to make the books more interactive. Inkling is

iPad only, while the other three work on computers as well.

The main reason I hadn't heard of these companies in the library context is because they host and supply textbooks marketed toward the end user, to purchase or rent, so they most directly impact the business of our campus bookstore. However, if the goal is a seamless user experience for reading and annotating course content, the library will have to be involved as well.

The **Reed College Library** has a brisk business in print course reserves, and we are starting to supplement this with electronic course reserves. A few of these course readings are textbooks, but the vast majority are other academic publications, including novels and graphic works. We have found that a large proportion of these works are accessible through our main eBook platform, so we frequently purchase an eBook copy to accompany the print copies. We are still evaluating the uptake of these reserve eBooks, while we work to make them more easily discoverable. Assuming we will continue to move course reserves towards electronic format, we will not be able to maintain a single platform approach. At this point, no eBook provider has complete coverage of the market, so as professors request books that are not provided by our main platform, we will need to enter into new contracts to supply this other material.

The most obvious conflict between what our campus IT would like to do and our current environment is one of content. The course and textbook management products, and their available content, are aimed at providing textbooks, while our institution, like many, assigns a much greater variety of class readings. If no library eBook provider is able to cover the full range of desired course materials, it's hard to see how these other course and textbook management products will do so. However, while a student may not be able to purchase all the readings for a class on

a single platform, I can imagine a workable system where a syllabus in one of these course or textbook management products links out to more than one platform (library-provided or otherwise), as well as providing textbooks that appear natively in the product.

Annotation of material is much more problematic. Some eBook providers allow PDF downloads of content that can be imported into, and annotated in, most reader apps, including several of the textbook and course management products I've mentioned. However, several of the major library eBook providers require downloads in Adobe Digital Editions format and reading apps that will support that platform. This is moderately painful to users in its current form, but certainly more so if these eBooks will not work with the course management and e-reading platforms that are gaining in popularity. If the download options are only Adobe Digital Editions or another non-PDF file format, or, as is sometimes the case, the provider only allows content to be "checked out" for a period of time, the content cannot be saved and annotated in the same place as content appearing in the course or textbook management software. As many of the complaints with the **Kindle** campus pilots centered on the inability to easily annotate readings, the issue of annotation has to be considered as a priority for course e-texts. Managing annotations on multiple platforms will make the reading experience much more complicated for students.

For some academic environments, these pressures will not be as problematic. For schools whose classes primarily read textbooks, these new products may be able to consolidate readings effectively. Likewise, many academic libraries do not have an extensive course reserve program, and so the disconnect between purchased material through a textbook product and materials available for library borrowing will not be an issue. However, most colleges and universities encourage their students and faculty to read outside of the course materials, for term papers or projects or just to understand more about a discipline. These supplementary readings, usually coming from the library, will have to clear the same hurdles as course texts if students want to manage them along with their regular assigned readings.

So what's the answer? At this point, managing expectations may be the best first step; the growing diversity of players and needs in this market will make it very difficult to consolidate course readings on a single platform without compromising the free choice of class materials. Over time, working with vendors and publishers to find ways for library-purchased content to be more easily uploaded to course and textbook management systems will allow not just the move to campus-wide e-content systems, but the ability for students and faculty to choose for themselves the best way to read, save, and annotate content. 🐿

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ing its stately way down our beautiful campus streets, but upon the cell phone taking a video of the event. The truth be told, they never actually saw the thing with their own eyes! Instead, their focus was on the tiny screen as they watched their videos for the first time — while shooting them. They never even thought about it. It was their first instinct.

I don't condemn this, but I think it worth noting. And although I can't prove it, and

must be cautious in how emphatically I assert it, I think that the technology fundamentally changed the way that entire population experienced that event.

So let's be cautious, a little circumspect, in the face of the traveling medicine show that is today's technology marketplace. Let's keep trying to innovate. Let's support open standards and tools that permit us to migrate content forward as platforms come and go (and they will). And when appropriate, let's each be the kid who spoke the truth about the emperor's new threads. 🐿