Is It Time to Switch to Digital Textbooks?

Yes

Every day, educators must choose the tools they will use to teach their students. Pencils, highlighters, Animoto, Glogster—the options seem endless. So should we use e-texts or traditional texts? The larger question is how our students will be writing and reading in their future. What tools most closely resemble the tools they are likely to use? Are we educating students for their future or for our past? When the question is framed this way, the answer becomes clear. Education definitely should be making the move to digital texts now.

One reason for moving to e-texts now rather than later is student engagement and buy-in. Digital readers will engage today’s students and connect education to their everyday lives. Getting some students to open a textbook or even remember to bring it home can often be more than half the battle. But many of those same students are accustomed to traveling

No

It is time to re-examine our thinking about students’ needs and how we can best serve them. Digital books are excellent resources, as are online databases and authoritative information sites. However, a digital textbook is only better than a standard printed one in that it can help lighten students’ backpacks. In terms of the most efficient delivery of education, it is a weak solution. We are already failing to meet students’ needs by spending a semester reading through a commercially produced, static, printed textbook. Putting that same textbook in a digital format is not an improvement.

A major criticism of the standard classroom textbook is that it seldom provides fascinating reading. In fact, it usually provides a very uninspiring experience for students. I have never heard students suggest that textbooks gave them a passion for the subject or encouraged them to become lifelong learners of history, literature, or science. Sadly, a textbook
with their digital appendages, including cell phones, cameras, iPods, MP3 players, and video cameras. Imagine students having their textbooks with them wherever they go.

Perhaps a more educationally compelling reason is that e-texts support differentiation and move us closer to individualized education. A digital text can easily allow for text-to-speech, pronunciation guides, and vocabulary support for students who are reading below grade level. For English language learners, a digital textbook can couple translations or language support with the English text. And for gifted students, digital textbooks provide opportunities for enrichment and self-extension. In all of these examples, student learning and ownership of their learning are increased. How can we better achieve the goal of inspiring lifelong learners than by instilling pride and self-determination for their learning?

Finally, a text that is interactive and up to date is infinitely more appealing than a dusty old tome. Traditional texts are necessarily linear, even with graphics. For many of our students, this type of text creates difficulties in reading, comprehension, and motivation. Interactive text, however, allows for more chunking of information and greater graphic scaffolding of comprehension as well as active audio and visual support. Updates are also as close as the next upload. No longer do districts have to wait until the next edition is available. How many classrooms still have science textbooks that count Pluto as a planet? Changes in science and history occur in seconds. Changes in traditional texts take years.

Obviously, digital textbooks are closer to our students’ future than not. Are there concerns with moving to digital texts? Of course. But there are legitimate issues with traditional texts as well. Instead of using these concerns as reasons for not moving forward, let us discover the solutions. It is time to move forward and adapt. If not now, when?

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We have much better tools available to us today, and we should use them. It’s time to move into the digital world, but putting a lot of energy and expense into a digital version of a textbook is, at best, only a halfway measure. Anything that we can do with a textbook we can accomplish in a more engaging and efficient manner with online resources.

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We ask: Are we using textbooks—digital or paper—because they are the most efficient way we have to help our students learn, or are we using them because we are most comfortable with them? We ask our students to learn something new every day, and that is what we should be doing right along with them.

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