
An Alternative Publishing Model for Academic Textbook Authors: Open Education and Writing Commons <<http://writingcommons.org>>

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Abstract

Rather than assigning copyright to traditional or even nontraditional publishers for 5 to 15% of royalties, faculty can be their own publishers and own all of their materials – subject to institutional copyright restrictions. Teachers can now play the role of textbook authors, primarily because the Internet provides them with access to an unprecedented global reach. Textbook authors no longer need to work through a major publisher and their extensive networks of sales people. Unlike the past, when materials conditions required textbook authors to find publishers to print and publicize their work, they can now publish their work online and reach significant numbers of readers worldwide. Genres differ, from blogs and vlogs to social websites.

Faculty can enjoy very positive benefits from publishing their work at their own websites or other open-education spaces. *Writing Commons* <<http://writingcommons.org>> exemplifies this process. While the core text of *Writing Commons* was written by Joe Moxley, a professor of English and director of composition at the University of South Florida, *Writing Commons* now peer-reviews submissions from faculty who wish to share open-education resources. Using a Creative Commons NC Share Alike 3.0 license, *Writing Commons* enables contributors to reach a broad audience and to productively challenge the traditional genre of a textbook. By facilitating peer production, *Writing Commons* exemplifies a new kind of writing textbook, a web-textbook not written by a single author in the “old-school” way but by us, by a crowd of people out there who think we need a new more interactive, more Web 2.0ish-text; one that can be easily edited to meet your needs, and one that is readily available on your phone, PDA, or netbook. Web-textbooks like *Writing Commons* provide an expansive resource that meets the needs of any college-level writer.

Even before its “launch date,” *Writing Commons* received between 150 to 200 distinct users a day, thereby demonstrating successful “impact”—one of the traditional measures of the academic reward system. Based on Joomla, an open-source Content Management Tool, *Writing Commons* can provide analytical information regarding the number of readers for each article.

Keywords

Academic Publishing, Webtexts, Copyright, Creative Commons, Academic Reward System

Commercial textbooks are receiving loads of bad press. Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, wants to abandon traditional textbooks. Even the Gubernator—before his fall from grace – wanted to terminate them. In her description of the textbook debacle, Nicole Allen, the Affordable Textbooks Advocate for Student PIRGs, describes the problem as “Ripoff 101!” State legislatures, student government groups, and concerned faculty from across the U.S. are struggling to develop and implement policies that reduce the overall cost of textbooks, such as establishing textbook rental programs, requiring faculty to order textbooks sooner so that more used books can be purchased by the university bookstore, and in general, advocating free, open textbooks.

The flaws of the existing textbook production system are well known: exorbitant costs to support the publishers in light of the undercurrent of the used-book market; poor usage of the textbooks in the classrooms; increasing costs. Even so, my sense is that we are on questionable ground when critiquing textbook publishers for skyrocketing costs or thinking that *all* books should be digital. Having authored textbooks myself, I’m aware of the countless hours that go into producing them. Additionally, I’m aware of the high costs of reproducing prose samples, from poems and stories, to creative nonfiction. Even when publishers avoid the costs associated with print editions and produce ebooks, these ebooks can still be very costly, given copyright expenses. As long as successful authors place a premium on reprint permissions for their works, textbooks that include these copyrighted materials will be justifiably expensive, necessary, and worthwhile. Even when they are expensive, printed textbooks can be exceedingly important for students and instructors, particularly when designed for large courses with multiple sections taught by adjunct faculty. Hence, from my perspective as a faculty member, a textbook author, and as director of a large composition programs in the U.S., I understand that not all books can be free, and I recognize some high-quality texts can be very expensive. I also understand that content creators are partially motivated by a market economy, wanting to receive payment for their investments and creations; I support that effort.

That said, I do think there are instances when faculty may want to consider publishing their pedagogical materials for free, either on their own websites or social pedagogy sites. I think it’s time for faculty to consider publishing free, online textbooks and at the very least, it’s time for faculty to abandon Blackboard and embrace the capabilities of open-source educational resources. While putting economic motivations aside, faculty may realize benefits from publishing their pedagogical materials online. Having played a leadership role in developing *Writing Commons* <<http://writingcommons.org>>, a free, open-education resource that aspires to be a “home” community for writers, I’m eager to let other faculty know how rewarding it can be to develop and share an open textbook via a domain that they own and operate. Seeing users logged on to your site, as illustrated in figure 1 below, can be a valuable reward. Providing a social space for learners by embedding collaboration tools like wikis, discussion forums, or social bookmarking can be an energizing way to sustain and extend your teaching.

Figure 1 Samples of Visitor Logs, 3/1/2012

Recent [?]	Recent [?]
Thursday, March 01 @ 08:51 : London, GB	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:32 : Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 08:51 : Kent, Ohio, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:24 : Kuala Lumpur, MY
Thursday, March 01 @ 08:42 : Lakeland, Florida, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:22 : Portsmouth, Ohio, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 08:32 : Groningen, NL	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:19 : Newcastle Upon Tyne, GB
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:50 : Tampa, Florida, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:01 : Eastleigh, GB
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:46 : Watford, GB	Thursday, March 01 @ 10:00 : Pinellas Park, Florida, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:44 : Bergenfield, New Jersey, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 09:54 : Oakland Gardens, New York, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:37 : Champaign, Illinois, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 09:33 : Winchester, GB
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:37 : Tampa, Florida, US	Thursday, March 01 @ 09:32 : Tampa, Florida, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:05 : Muntinlupa City, PH	Thursday, March 01 @ 09:23 : Mission, Texas, US
Thursday, March 01 @ 07:01 : Mountain View, California, US	

For approximately \$70 year (\$10 for the domain name and \$60 for hosting) faculty can break free of the constraints of Blackboard or Web CT. Many hosting providers, such as GoDaddy!, provide a suite of free, open-source authoring tools, such as Joomla, Word Press, and Drupal. In my experience, these tools are surprisingly powerful and easy to use, and they contain a variety of peer production and social media features. Instead of building a new course in Blackboard every semester—and then needing to do it again and again, semester after semester—faculty can host their ideas and their classes on their server at their domains. This is particularly helpful if you tend to teach the same course each semester. Developing an online textbook for a course you regularly teach can enable you to build a sturdy course that grows over time. Additionally, opening the space to collaborative tools like wikis energizes your students as it gives them an opportunity to extend their learning, to talk with one another, and to produce relevant texts—texts that other Internet-users may read.

Engaging students in a collaborative effort to build a viable textbook creates energy and focus for courses. Rather than importing the values of a book editor from Boston or New York, faculty can customize their contributions to meet the special needs of their students and colleagues. Consider, for example, Matt Barton’s experience contributing to the Rhetoric and Composition wiki at Wikibooks. Barton began the wiki book as a graduate student at USF and now, five years later, Barton and others use the book in St. Cloud State University’s first-year composition courses. In turn, Lanette Cadle wrote a Basic Writing wikibook with her students in a Theory of Basic Writing graduate course at Missouri State University. Her project was a productive way for the graduate students to apply theory and has become a useful resource for under-served composition students seeking help with writing projects. MC Morgan, a professor at Bemidji State University, shares Barton’s and Cadle’s enthusiasm for engaging students in collaborative, textbook publishing efforts, having worked with students on the “Wiki Writing Handbook” – which he publishes at <http://erhretoric.org>. Morgan cites numerous advantages to weaving the handbook into the rhetorical context of the course and the media of the wiki: “Because the advice is contextualized, it’s more useful than that offered in a traditional handbook. And because the handbook can be updated by those using it, the advice matures, becomes more sophisticated and more connected to practices on the wiki ” (M.C. Morgan, personal communication, June 1, 2010).

Although it is ultimately less daunting than it first appears, I recognize that hosting your own textbook and courseware on your domain may initially seem too technical and time consuming. Fortunately, there are numerous alternative approaches. For example, at

Connexions <<http://cnx.org/>> sponsored by Rice University, faculty can publish pedagogical materials in a module format, for free. In turn, the Orange Grove, sponsored by the University of Florida Press and the Florida Distance Learning Consortium, offers an additional alternative. Perhaps the biggest resource out there is Wikibooks, which hosts—at the time I write this—“2,437 books with 40,490 pages.”

When selecting a public space for publishing your work, such as Connexions, Orange Grove, Wikibooks, or Flatworld Knowledge, you should give some thought to copyright considerations. Frankly, I have struggled with the best copyright—or copyleft – for *Writing Commons*. After having worked for at least three years, writing over 325 articles—the equivalent of a 400-page college rhetoric textbook that a traditional publisher would sell for at least \$100—I found it very difficult to give the material away for free; to accept an open Creative Commons license. Indeed, when I talked with copyright experts, many of them recommended I choose a traditional copyright license, one that reserved all rights to my work. Yet when I talked with David Wiley, Cable Green, and other OER leaders, they challenged me to consider my ultimate goal for *Writing Commons*, which is to leverage the miracle of peer production so that I can grow the resource in ways that make it useful for any college student, whether she is taking an introduction to poetry course, a course on public policy, or a course on writing for engineers. “If you want to grow a community around the project,” Charlie Lowe told me, “you’ve got to open it up, to allow for derivatives.” After several years of fretting about the options with colleagues, I settled on [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). To that license, I added this addendum: Derivative Works must publish this disclaimer: “This work is a derivative work of *Writing Commons*, a peer-reviewed, open-education resource that is published at <http://writingcommons.org>. As a derivative work, this is a secondary citation that may contain work that is not peer-reviewed.” Now, as we have received our first submissions and are putting those through the peer-review process, I’m happy to see that preliminary indications have suggested that I made the right choice; that other teachers are responding to our invitations to contribute and that there is a possibility for growing a community around the project.

In summary, then, I think my experience developing *Writing Commons* suggests a viable publishing option for other academics: if you have a good deal of content then you should consider hosting it on your own site. In time, there is no reason why you cannot grow a robust site like *Writing Commons*. If you don’t want to commit time and resources to building, maintaining and extending a site, then you have other choices—from nontraditional publishers, like Flatworld Knowledge (who have fairly traditional contracts) to totally free sites like Wikis that provide Creative Commons alternatives. Or *Writing Commons* ...

Of course, if you can develop a financially competitive textbook and sell it through a commercial publisher, then that’s an outstanding option: Faculty members deserve good pay for their work, and I have nothing against expensive textbooks that are used well. At 15% on a \$100 textbook, the rewards for textbook authors can be astonishing—especially for textbooks that pertain to large, required courses. We’ve all known faculty who hit this

jackpot and have since been sailing in the Caribbean. Nothing wrong with that – if winning the lottery is what you want.

Despite these outliers, the bottom line is that most textbooks don't make money for their authors. In most disciplines, the ship has sailed on the big book. Until some major shift in a discipline's knowledge base, textbook authors lack the leverage they need to position their book as a viable alternative to the 12th or 15th edition of the tried-and-true version. Big publishers like Pearson continue to churn out hundreds of books for the same discipline, even though they know the books are unlikely to compete with the traditional leading textbooks. While some critics fault faculty for producing commercial books for their students, I think that criticism may be short-sighted and anti-intellectual. Who else, after all, is in a better position to develop a good book for his or her class than the faculty member who teaches that class?

Yet the problem for most textbook authors is that they sign away their copyright in exchange for 5% to 15% royalties. If the book fails, like so many do, then the author has lost control over his or her intellectual property for pennies on the dollar. Regrettably—and I know this from personal experience—some publishers may refuse to return copyright even after a book fails, which means the work is lost forever. To me, this is a significant danger as we all have only so many words we can write in a career.

As a university professor, I'm well aware of the comforts of the tried-and-true. Even so, it's time for faculty to ask, "Why not?"; "Why not plant a flag?" You can start out small. In the beginning you don't need to commit to writing a massive text. In fact, you probably shouldn't. Try loading a small lesson at a public blog or wiki site, or better yet, begin by joining our community at *Writing Commons*. Together, by embracing peer production, social media, and intellectual freedom, we can extend our teaching, our professional lives, and our academic disciplines for future successes.

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