
Misplaced marketing

The largest segments that should not be served: higher education marketing serving the growing slacker segment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to recognize how common practices of selling textbooks to university educators provide the tools for the faculty to minimize their teaching efforts. When coupled with higher education practices that see students as customers, such as university administrators' day-to-day goals driven by concerns of complaint avoidance, students "voting with their feet" for popular courses or the evaluation of teaching by use of students' evaluations of faculty, actual education gets minimized.

Design/method/approach – The paper describes common supplemental teaching aids provided to adopters of textbooks, but noting that the extensive use of these tools results in decreasing outcomes of student learning. The textbook publishers are using good marketing practices in that these textbook supplements target faculty who teach large numbers of students every year. In turn, the faculty who rely on these aids can become very popular with students. However, marketing to these segments of faculty and (indirectly) to these students might actually encourage the growth of these segments to the detriment of the smaller numbers of students who actually want an education and faculty would be willing to do the work to provide it.

Findings – The paper finds that, while popular attention such as the US "No Child Left Behind" legislation has been toward the primary education levels to ensure students are actually learning to read and write and while high schools increasingly use high stakes testing before students are allowed to graduate, the marketing practices of higher education could be serving the decline of thinking among college graduates. Textbooks target sales to faculty who want quantities of teaching aids to simplify the work, and schools can make classes more popular by asking students to do less thinking.

Originality/value – The paper provides a critical statement of common higher education practices that are not widely known or whose dangers are ignored.

Keywords Books, Education, Colleges, Students, Universities, Teaching

Paper type Viewpoint

Slacker (adjective): a person who shirks work or obligation; a person who is perceived to be lacking ambition wherein "getting by" is "good enough".

Business faculty are blessed by the gifts of the marketplace, rewarding us for the large numbers of undergraduate students that crave to have credit for our courses noted on their transcripts. To encourage us to select their textbooks, publishers provide the tools we need to be slackers and provide courses that are popular with slackers. And since the many students are concerned with credit, not learning, if the instructor can also claim a small amount of talent as an entertainer, the path is set to win teaching awards (e.g., see Rotfeld, 1996, 1999).

Start first with the competitive textbook market. As a reward for adopting a textbook and requiring large numbers of student purchases, many teaching aids are available. If the

classes are especially popular, adopting one book from a company can result in a cornucopia of teaching aides that accompany other books from that company the instructor might require students to purchase in the future terms.

For some subjects, publishers will provide enough video materials to fill huge blocks of class time, reducing the need to prepare lectures or attempt discussions. Of course, some disciplines are more blessed than others; it is easier to create inexpensive video packages with collections of advertising for Marketing classes than it is to provide videos on Accounting or Finance. But regardless of discipline area, instructors receive PowerPoint displays of text and figures from the textbook, plus teaching guides, case examples and outlines of the chapters to be used for lectures. Publishers also provide computer programs with large collections of multiple-choice or true-false questions to be used for exams. To maximize encouragement of faculty slackerdom, there is no need for the instructor to actually read the questions, since the program will select them automatically following simple heuristic guides such as the number of questions to draw from each chapter. In the end, the videos, PowerPoint packages and computerized exam question banks encourage faculty to run classes devoid of mental involvement with either the course material or the students.

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These additional instructor packages are all examples of good marketing practices: as added features for a textbook, they meet many faculty needs and are strong incentives behind their selection of which books students will be required to buy. They do have some positive values, too. They help a first time teacher get started. The data banks provide a useful template on which to base exams for large-section classes. Even if an instructor ignores the data bank and writes all original questions, the programs provide a useful way to store questions for multiple uses or to scramble the multiple-choice questions and options to make it difficult for students to copy answers off someone seated nearby.

Unfortunately, this job of efficient marketing is sometimes misplaced, or at least abused. Teaching has become too easy or too unimportant for too many faculty whose lectures only use the unaltered publisher-provided PowerPoint files and their tests are drawn from unedited data banks of exam questions. When instructors never add materials or test questions from those found in the programs, students only need to read the textbook and memorize its printed lists. Since it often happens that many of the publisher-provided questions are drawn from sometimes-trivial details of checklists (Rotfeld, 1998), students are memorizing lists instead of thinking about the materials.

Admittedly, the problem is greater than the apparent misplaced marketing of textbooks. It is hard to explain to people outside the academic world, but while college faculty are being paid to teach, how much they are paid is mostly based on what they do when not teaching. Overall, research is measured, committees are counted and teaching is done. Faculty avoid taking the time to work at being teachers for all sorts of reasons. Committee meetings also can get in the way of teaching, same as golf, motorcycle riding, office politics, alcohol-heavy lunches, etc. Teaching gets in the way of research. Grading gets in the way of talking to colleagues. Talking to colleagues gets in the way of talking to students.

But it must also be admitted, though reluctantly, that teaching easy courses the slacker way is popular among students. At any university, more students will fight to get into the class sections that use multiple choice exams drawn from the textbook. Instructors will relate that having a syllabus listing essay tests leads to an immediate loss of one-fourth of the students after the first class meeting. As the predominant measures of teaching effectiveness have become students evaluations of the teachers as expressed on forms they fill out on the last class day, the faculty become focused on doing what the students find pleasing.

Nor is the problem new or a function of modern technology. Many years ago, at another university BPC (before personal computers), I raised the ire of my department head for some of my teaching decisions for a course whose textbook he wrote. His actual words were that he "couldn't understand" why I wanted to do what he felt was unnecessary extra work instead of just following the outlines in the instructors' manual. I brought in extra materials. I possessed the audacity to give essay exams, which he insisted reduced enrollment in the elective course and, in turn, sales of his book. As he put it, everything anyone needs was in his book, so it made no sense to him why I took on the extra work of writing and grading exams. He said, "Just tell the secretary to retype every other true-false question from the manual."

Some would say I was foolish, or maybe masochistic, when I held firm. For the next term, the department head took on

teaching all sections of the course. Enrollments did increase, and I periodically saw his secretary with the teachers' manual next to her typewriter as she copied the questions for his next test.

Admittedly, body counts are often important on campus and some administrators who are not selling their textbooks tell faculty to give easier exams to increase enrollments. State universities need to provide a rationale for tax dollars; private schools pay the bills with tuition payments. On campus, departments fight with each other to attract students. And since it is important to get a large number of students in the classes, we notice that many of them appear to like easy tests and classes that can be passed without taking lecture notes. Since lectures are irrelevant, attendance is not important, or they attend with textbooks open and markers in hand, coloring sentences bright colors where the instructor mentions it as important.

For faculty, it is easier to teach from the text and use the publisher-provided materials. For students, the resulting classes are easier and (maybe) more enjoyable. It is easier for everyone, but no one benefits when students learn less.

The truly sorry fact is that even textbook authors do not see the problem.

An author of several textbooks present his historical review of the publications at an academic conference several years ago. Yet, as with much of historical analysis, the selection of items highlighted and general assertions also indicated the academic philosophy and views of the reviewer. In this presentation, lengthy and repeated mention was made of what he referenced as the three great innovation "milestones" in the textbooks: use of cartoons to present the material, color pictures, and computerized test banks with instructor packages (Ferrell, 1998). Instead of an evolution of devices for student thinking, his history revealed the evolution of textbooks as a method of increasing the fun for students and making teaching an easier activity. The textbooks themselves in many disciplines are not even reflective of the state-of-knowledge as reported in research journals, but that is another problem dealt with in detail elsewhere (e.g. Armstrong and Schultz, 1993; Rotfeld, 2000). Yet this author felt that bringing textbooks to the category of popular comic books and making it easier for instructors to write tests provided a positive set of landmarks.

A recent graduate was visiting town not long ago, coming by my office in a talk that turned to her thinking about her education and its value. She described the types of courses from her prior years, noting those from which she learned the most and those that just took up time. As I told her some of the items mentioned above, she asked, "Can't we force faculty to not use the stuff from textbook publishers?" She was asking why we can't force faculty to not be slackers, but then she had to admit that the faculty slackers were popular with many students.

A University should focus on thinking, but our textbooks are filled with lists for students to memorize. In reality, a successful career requires a facile and educated mind, not specific information that any book might contain. The classroom experience should have more value than just the credit and grades from exams. Faculty fail to strongly and repeatedly tell students that the abilities to think and write clearly are more important than the textbook's checklists.

Unfortunately, the pressures are in the other directions, as too many faculty or administrators see students as customers

who “buy” our courses and degrees. The textbook publishers are merely serving the needs of large segments of their customers. And somehow, the end loser could be the students in our classes.

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