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# Despite Predictions of Their Demise, College Textbooks aren't Going Away

Norm Friesen  
*Boise State University*

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## Despite predictions of their demise, college textbooks aren't going away

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While textbooks have been said to be on their way, they are still a mainstay in higher education. [SayHope/www.shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

The textbook has been declared dead many times over. Progressive educator John Dewey decried the “text-book fetish” back in the 1890s. Former U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan wished out loud for textbooks to become obsolete. Articles on the demise of textbooks regularly appear with each new school year. They describe these books as only so much content, as an indifferent information dump, as dead tree versions of information that would be better presented interactively, via multiple media.

This article is different. As the author of book titled “The Textbook and the Lecture,” I’ve compiled a list of five reasons why I believe textbooks are here to stay:

### 1. Textbooks make money

Textbooks represent an US\$11 billion dollar industry, up from \$8 billion in 2014. Textbook publisher Pearson is the largest publisher – of any kind – in the world.

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### Author



**Norm Friesen**

Professor, Boise State University

It costs about \$1 million to create a new textbook. A freshman or sophomore textbook will have dozens of contributors, from subject-matter experts through graphic and layout artists to expert reviewers and classroom testers. Textbook publishers connect professors, instructors and students in ways that alternatives, such as Open E-Textbooks and Open Educational Resources, simply do not. This connection happens not only by means of collaborative development, review and testing, but also at conferences where faculty regularly decide on their textbooks and curricula for the coming year.

It is true that textbook publishers have **recently reported losses**, largely due to **students renting or buying used print textbooks**. But this can be chalked up to the exorbitant cost of their books - which

has increased over 1,000 percent since 1977. A reshuffling of the textbook industry may well be in order. But this does not mean the end of the textbook itself.

## **2. Textbooks are active and interactive**

While they may not be as dynamic as an iPad, textbooks are not passive or inert. For example, over the centuries, they have simulated dialogue in a number of ways. From 1800 to the present day, textbooks have done this by posing questions for students to answer inductively. That means students are asked to use their individual experience to come up with answers to general questions. Today's psychology texts, for example, ask: "How much of your personality do you think you inherited?" while ones in physics say: "How can you predict where the ball you tossed will land?"

Experts observe that "textbooks come in layers, something like an onion." For the active learner, engaging with a textbook can be an interactive experience: Readers proceed at their own pace. They "customize" their books by engaging with different layers and linkages. Highlighting, Post-It notes, dog-ears and other techniques allow for further customization that students value in print books over digital forms of books.



Engaging with a textbook can be an interactive experience. GaudiLab/www.shutterstock.com

### **3. Shift happens**

Thomas Kuhn, who coined the phrase “paradigm shift,” saw textbooks as indispensable for establishing scientific paradigms. Textbooks do this, he said, by getting students to work through problems that lie at the foundation of a scientific discipline. Textbooks “exhibit, from the very start, concrete problem-solutions that the profession has come to accept as paradigms, and they then ask the student, either with a pencil and paper or in the laboratory, to solve (these) for himself.”

Paradigms, the models or archetypes that serve as a foundation for a discipline, might eventually shift, but it is textbooks that establish the paradigms in the first place.

Kuhn went so far as to say that “scientific education remains a relatively dogmatic initiation into a pre-established problem-solving tradition that the student is neither invited nor equipped to evaluate.” I’ve talked about this with both theorists and practitioners in science education. The theorists - all professors - insist that students should be given time to explore and “authentically re-discover” Kuhn’s paradigms for themselves. But instructors in undergraduate science courses point to time and teaching limits. They see textbooks’ tightly integrated and meticulously organized labs and problem-questions as indispensable. They’re generally glad to have the textbook help them connect students with the breadth of their discipline and its underlying paradigms. Kuhn was not entirely wrong, it seems, when he talked of science education as a “relatively dogmatic initiation.”

#### **4. Concrete examples**

Textbooks use the “art of the example” to illuminate, illustrate and make things more concrete. Today’s diagrams, simulations, narratives and cases work like inductive questions from 1800: They connect the concrete and specific with things that are much more abstract and difficult to grasp. An image of a hydrogen atom exemplifies the structure of all atoms. A business case stands for a range of entrepreneurial possibilities. Asking “Who are the people in your neighborhood?” leads to examples from adult work life. This is a secret behind all good educational content. And textbooks often work with the art of the example in a way that is itself exemplary.

#### **5. Education is resistant to change**

Like oil and water, educational practice and the latest technologies don’t easily mix. This has been called education’s “technology deficit”. When technologies are actually adopted – like smart boards or laptops - they fit in with the larger patterns of the classroom, rather than “disrupting” them. The reason for this is that education, unlike, say, pop music or gas-guzzling cars, isn’t just another “industry” ripe for disruption. It doesn’t produce commodities for consumers, but is about sustaining equilibrium between diverse stakeholders: students, employers, accreditation bodies, the larger community and others.

As I show in my recent book, higher education is expected to reproduce and revise very complex subjects, many of which have been developing for hundreds of years. This activity is thus done in ways that themselves stay remarkably stable. The lecture hall, the textbook, even the dissertation and the oral defense have been in place for centuries - almost a millennium. For this reason, I’d say it’d be better to understand how textbooks have enabled knowledge to be transmitted and developed over time, rather than yet again declaring them dead or obsolete.