Drawn into the Mall of the iBook

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About a year ago, I was given the opportunity to convert a print textbook entitled, Dialogues of Belief and Reason Level 200-the standard textbook for a second year course in the Core Curriculum at Lynn University into an iBook format. The core curriculum requires over sixty hours of interdisciplinary course work described as the Dialogues of Learning utilizing classical publications from Plato to Thomas Kuhn. The original textbook was a compilation of introductions, commentaries and original works.

The form of the iBook was to be similar to the print version, and like the older printed versions, the textbook was subject to the regular review of the required readings, at which time some readings are added or subtracted. My co-author, Michael Lewis and I decided to organize our work into chapters. Six months later, the resultant work was twenty-two chapters and 324 pages in length.

The purpose of this presentation is to examine some of the traditional problems of writing and editing a textbook that have a new set of consequences when introduced in electronic media. These consequences, I am arguing, have major impacts on the nature of the teaching profession, literacy expectations, and educational policy which when combined will effectively transform the nature of the educational institution. In some respects this is of course, old news, and it may even seem like hyperbole, but I suspect that your reaction will differ depending upon whether you or your institution is actively replacing the older printed model with a new online/multimedia environment or resisting the changes that are being driven by the technology.

I have intentionally used the word "drawn" in the title of this presentation to convey both meaning of being pulled or attracted towards something and also to create a picture or drawing. I will argue that electronic media is an inexorable movement to which we will all eventually succumb and the second meaning highlights the different nature of authoring in a multimedia environment. From the layout of text to the insertion of images, every aspect of the book becomes visual. The metaphor of the etextbook as a kind of a shopping mall is deliberate, too, and focuses my argument on the forces that are outside of the traditional concerns of education. Because I'm Irish the sound of words have equal importance to me, so the choice of "mall" conjures up the word "maw" or the jaws of a voracious animal according to Webster!

Depending upon the nature of the course you are offering the focus of the materials used will be different. In the case of the type of course that I am responsible for offering at my university (the core curriculum requires that students attend two courses designated as English or writing intensive courses) Michael Lewis and I organized our editing and book production around the central texts. Using the analogy of the mall, these texts are the anchor stores of the mall-the Penney or Marshal Fields stores. These stores comprise the main focus of the individual chapters within the book. The widgets, or apps

that can be employed within the iBook, can be compared to the smaller specialty stores like Footlocker or Victorias Secret. Most of these apps allow students to enter the shop and look around, but not produce anything. For example, a widget we called research called up the encyclopedic entry for a specific term or concept that was included in the glossary of the iBook. Other similar type apps included video and audio links to sites like other iTunesU courses in video lecture and podcast forms or YouTube or Vimeo videos that were in the public domain.   All of these applications, like the text I should note, treat the student as a consumer. You can look or buy but you can't produce anything and add it to the malls offerings.

The widgets are placeholders within the text, allowing the text to flow around or be interrupted by the text, so the placement of the widgets was part of the design challenges of the textbook. How many interruptions besides the normal chapter and paragraph breaks are acceptable for reading practice? How can you interrupt the text in any fashion without disrupting the sustained reading and comprehension of the students? At what point or how many widgets does it take to divert the attention of the students towards the specialty stores and not the anchors? The research that is available to answer these questions is mixed. There is extensive support for etext affordances, that is, the ability to transfer meaning dependent upon the media, from the learning disabilities quarter. For example, the ability of the text to create audio files for students to listen is one great affordance of the medium. The body of criticism of the ebook is growing also but the general consensus revolves around the problem of sustained reading practice which doesn't seem to me to be a new problem and not one that can be identified strictly as a phenomenon related to electronic medium versus the print medium. I think where the research shows problems with student reading practices tends to do so from an assumption that we are expecting our students to produce traditional texts with their traditional forms of argumentation. I believe that our expectations for what the forms of a sustained argument will be must change in relation to the technologies and the affordances of those media.

In spite of the great swoop of history within which our endeavours must necessarily take place, Michael and I had a textbook to create and a deadline! Our philosophy in designing the book was to try to resist the positioning of students as consumers and to take advantage of any applications that might allow students to make additions to the course materials. We tried to incentivize students with the possibility of having their own work published in subsequent versions and revisions of the iBook. Our version of the new textbook features exemplars from student writing along with a short biography of the student writer. Like most work in a published environment, we had to obtain permissions from the student authors in the form of a legal contract from the university.

This area of the mall where students are producers and not just consumers reflects some of the problems of private versus public spaces within the educational environment. An interesting approach to this problem of public versus private concerns that seems especially applicable to the textbook as a commons is offered by Margaret Kohn (2004) whose concerns are that the public spaces confined by commercial concerns offers a kind of watered down version of democratic processes where the common space is governed by a concern privileging civility over difference. The rights of individual students expressing themselves as if they were in public is sublimated to the concerns of the owners of the space, the university as publisher, the application software publishers and internet providers as

distributors of the content. Of course, you might say we are already restricted in our use of public spaces by our obligation to protect our students private information by federal standards like FERPA. This space of conflict between the desire to assist our students in making critically informed rhetorical choices in their communications and our desire to protect them from harm or abuse is not a new issue, but the decision makers making these choices are more often an administration driven by concerns over legal liabilities and the limitations built in to the public versus private spaces provided by the marketplace of Apple/iTunesU or their applications developers. As noted above, the chief concern of all of these stakeholders is corporate profits, not educational learning goals.

All of these stakeholders and their specific goals influence the design of the textbook. If an application is not approved for purchase by the IT department, then the text will not contain the application. As the textbook is more closely linked to the course shell within which it is offered, the text and its contents will also come more under the scrutiny of the instructional technology designers. Specific curricular goals associated with the course may have to be located within the larger goals of academic assessments and institutional research. The combined forces of assessments to meet accreditation and instructional design tend towards the standardization of the forms of information. When Michael Lewis and I build our iBook, I was mostly thrilled by the ability to create a unique text, but I suspect that freedom will not last as certain forms are perceived to be more desirable than others to meet the institutions goals. Our book, like all others, will be brought into a standard form.

It is this moment, then that I am most concerned with regards to my own professional and academic work and that of my students. There is an opportunity to open up new branches of the mall where students create their own stores with their own brands, courses that act as a kind of portal for ongoing projects and research as well as private arcades where students assemble their own portfolios of work developed throughout their academic careers.

So, future versions of the iBook may make it possible for the students to collaboratively build the mall. Each student can create their own gallery of work and achievements that allows a teacher or supervisor to distinguish an arc of learning over time in the same way that a painters' ouvre is discussed, this was the "blue period," etc. Observers such as professors or teachers can evaluate the works displayed and make judgments about the overall qualities of the work.

What we must not forget is that this space is still within the Mall of the iBook, constructed by interests that it is our duty as academics to interrogate and encourage our students to continue to be at least as critical of the material that they find on the premises as they are of the jeans that they bought most recently!