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Under the Hood -- Is Free a Very Good Price?

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Under the Hood — Is Free a Very Good Price?



Column Editor: **Xan Arch** (Collection Development Librarian, Reed College Library) <xanadu@reed.edu>

In Portland in the 1980s, we had a long-running commercial from a local furniture dealer, **Tom Peterson**, that proclaimed “Free is a Very Good Price.” Now that I’m back in Portland, however, I’ve found that free can actually be a huge pain. My new position includes management of library gifts. In a vague way, I knew that gifts could be a time-consuming task for libraries, but the reality was a shock. I arrived at **Reed** to find file cabinets full of gift letters, a hard drive full of the same letters, and a **FileMaker Pro** database with much of the same data. There was a history of gift backlogs that had taken up enormous amounts of shelf space and staff time. I felt that I needed to change the process immediately to ease the burden on the Acquisitions department and to help my own stress levels with my new duties.

My goals were:

Reduce duplication of information and time spent on data entry

Reduce record requirements by learning exactly what we need to be providing stakeholders

Streamline librarian involvement in evaluating gifts

First, I needed to reduce the amount of information being recorded for these donated items. The existing process was to record all incoming gifts in a **FileMaker** database, which provided the basis for inventory documents. A printed inventory of all donated items, regardless of whether the library kept them, was sent to the donor and to the Development office. After gifts were evaluated, a student returned to the **FileMaker** database and entered the call numbers on the records of the items that were retained in the library. In the meantime, the Cataloging department was cataloging the accepted gifts and entering a gift note into the catalog item record. The **FileMaker** database was touched twice for every accepted gift item, and the ILS records duplicated these accepted items.

My evaluation of the information being collected led quickly to the next goal. What did we actually need to be recording? I started internally to see if there was a basis for providing an inventory to each donor. No requirement existed, and for larger gifts, this printed inventory was a cumbersome addition to the thank-you letter. I quickly decided to discontinue printed inventories for donors, except by special request. Next, I talked to our Development and Business offices. What did they need in order to record the gift for their files? They did need an inventory, but they didn’t want it printed and they only needed a record of those gifts accepted by the library. We already had a system of record for accepted gifts, and that was the ILS. At this point, I could jettison the **FileMaker** database altogether. The cataloging

of accepted gifts in the ILS would be the only record kept. The only inventory needed was for Development, and it could be pulled from the ILS at the end of the gift process and sent electronically to Development.

Finally I looked at streamlining the evaluation process. We have been asking librarians to review incoming gift books, based on subject area, and depending on their workload, this process can take months. This delay became more of a problem after my other revisions in the process. Without a **FileMaker** database, I had to wait until the gifts were cataloged before I could generate an inventory. The Development office did not want a long lag time between gift donation and receipt of an inventory. Of course, we also did not want backlogs of gifts awaiting evaluation. How could I speed the evaluation process without putting too much pressure on my new colleagues?

I started with surveying them. I asked if they would consider a timeframe for gift evaluation, and what timeframe would be acceptable. Next I asked if I could assist in reviewing the books after the timeframe had passed. Finally I asked if we could establish some criteria that could cull a portion of the books before evaluation. We already culled books owned by **Reed** and those in poor condition, but I wanted to go a bit further. Our consortium, the **Orbis Cascade Alliance**, had started to discuss an unnecessary duplicate threshold by which librarians could make purchasing decisions by reviewing how many copies were held in the consortium already. The recommendation was if the consortium already held more than three copies, the library members would choose not to buy additional copies. This recommendation, still in the pilot phase with the **Alliance**, seemed to be a good basis for gift evaluation. If the **Alliance** already had more than three copies of a book, we might not want to add additional copies through gifts.

The majority of the respondents were in favor of a month timeline, my help with reviewing after a month, and the reduction of the total gifts for evaluation based on some initial criteria. However, there were a few strong objections. In some subject areas, the librarians did not feel that the number of copies held in the consortium was a good basis for decision, and in some cases, they preferred to do all evaluation themselves. Based on this, I built in some caveats. The month timeframe is negotiable, and if a librarian had conflicts they communicated to me in advance. The books that were culled based on the consortial threshold will sit on a shelf for the first month before being packaged for **Better World Books** and those librarians who objected to the consortial duplicate criterion used to de-select these books will have a chance to review this separate shelf within the month. The final evaluation

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 **McFarland**

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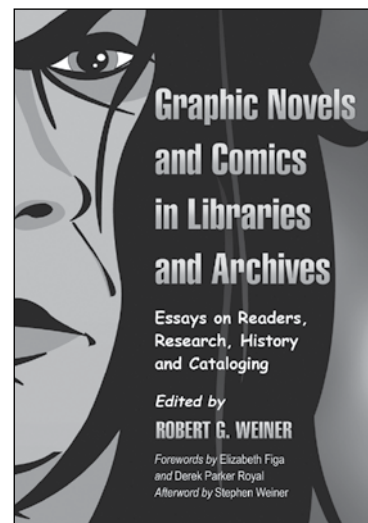
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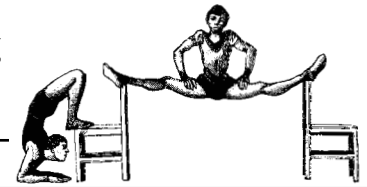
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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — Whistling whilst Walking past the Graveyard

by Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mp10@psu.edu>



This writing occurs as North Africa is undergoing dramatic and sweeping calls for change, country by country. The response, regime by regime, has reflected the instinctive responses of those who have become accustomed to being in power, whose expectations are that they can remain in power, that any means are justified to permit them to maintain their stranglehold on control: control, not only over their countries, but over the very nature of the debate itself....

It's an unjust comparison — no lives are being swept away in brutal slaughter, it's not about Human Rights. But. Make no mistake. The state of siege many publishers and book sellers find themselves in today emerges as a **grim analog**.

Do a search in **Google** news on the search term "textbook publishers," and you'll get an immediate overview of the breadth and diversity of upheaval in this long-standing staple of publishing and selling stability.

Countless articles, state by state, speak to dissatisfaction with K-12 textbooks, ranging from controversies over accuracy of content to more basic, even embarrassing, reports of typographical and grammatical errors (at least, **let's hope the publishers are embarrassed**), in books that, frankly, are bloody expensive — and difficult to update after they're sold (to say the least!).

You get the sense that there's real anger developing among folks who feel they really ought to be getting a better product for their tax dollars.

Meantime, Dallas area schools are preparing to shift to eBooks as the format of choice for some materials. A February 4th story in the *Dallas Morning News* speaks of Middle School students reading "*Much Ado About Nothing* on ...**Sony Readers, Kindles**, even an **iPhone**."

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guidelines with caveats were accepted by my colleagues and put into place immediately.

The opportunity to revise the gift procedures was a gift in itself as it provided me with a clear task to tackle immediately after starting my job. These changes in procedure are still new and will be subject to tests over the coming months. I can see already that gifts vary significantly in their requirements so there will be exceptional cases that won't fit into these guidelines. However, so far the feedback has been positive from staff and librarians both. Free can be a very good price, if managed efficiently. We have received wonderful material through library gifts, and I'm looking forward to refining the process further to make gifts even more of a benefit than a burden. 🌱

And why not? Anyone who's dabbled with the state of e-content today would come away with a high degree of certainty that the e-text rendering's of **Shakespeare's** works available in Open Source have reached a **reasonable degree of accuracy and authority**. A growing number of Middle School students — maybe most, before long, will be carrying devices with Internet Access in their pockets: their Smartphones. There isn't a single Smartphone that can't find, download, and save a copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* in a matter of minutes.

And the bits rendering the work of the **Bard** are weightless. Those bits add nothing to the load borne by backpacks straining under the weight of textbooks and notebooks. Many of these Readers, either dedicated or in software, offer searching, annotation, and other useful tools — these tools are not "cheats," they're merely **useful tools for scholarship** that are unavailable by nature in the traditional paper-based book publishing format.

So, some Book Publishers are including CD-ROMs with their textbooks, containing electronic content as a "bonus," as if this constitutes a feature offered by the forward-looking firm with the purchase of the bound copy. It's **perhaps too severe** to suggest that this constitutes a meager, halfway measure, an attempt to get by on the cheap, a kind of "whistling whilst passing the graveyard," **but only perhaps**.

The *Billings Gazette* asks in a February 4th headline, "Why are textbook prices so high?" Publishers take note: you've had a real good run, but your grip on the game may be slipping....

So what we have is a period in which both consumers and publishers are faced with the growing sense that the whole scene is undergoing fundamental change — change we aren't simply going to ride out — change that could change everything.

This darned e-content! It takes a while to come to terms with it. I've undergone a lengthy, meandering, evolution of attitude toward it myself.

I simply love my old favorite books. Some are from childhood — **Herge's** *Adventures of Tintin*, in the British translations, in the original large-format editions, or **Holling Clancy Holling's** masterful works such as *Seabird*, *Paddle to the Sea*, or *Minn of the Mississippi*, or all the *Babar* stories — I cherish these physical objects, have shared them with my children — have used them to teach them how we hold a book, how we treat it, how we turn pages....

Other, more grown-up material represent purposeful purchases. The *National Geographic Atlas*, the entire **Gabriel Allon** series by **Daniel Silva**, the **Scribner's** critical edition of *Moby Dick* — sure, there's **Google Earth**, and I've got eBook copies of both the **Silva** and the **Melville**, but there's still something about the big Atlas, or the nice hardbound edition.

But, blast it, it's also really nice to carry all this stuff — really, not just saying it — a

substantial personal library, in a single slim book-sized device. The exception remains the Atlas, for which I've yet to find a fully satisfying e-analog replacement: **Google Earth** requires a laptop at least, along with an Internet connection.

Indeed, maps, inserted graphics, and the potential for hyperlinks out of eBook content, pointing either to sources on the Web, or directly into other eBook content on your device itself — these all represent areas needful of invention and improvement. Why not have a book about music history with in-text links to MP3 content that comes along with the eBook, and loads along with the book as a single package?

And then there are Course Packs. If you want the **Poster Child** for the next step we all ought to figure out how to take, it's the Course Packs. For Heaven's sake! Much of this custom-printed content (maybe all, actually) begins as electronic content. We simply gather it up, pass it through **Copyright Clearance**, and then print it and bind it. Why? Why not go through the same process and create legitimate, copyright-cleared e-content?

Another development is occurring as well: organically, quietly, yet with growing momentum. Increasingly, teachers are producing learning material on the Web, or in wikis. I'm less familiar with the Middle and High School content, but can affirm that the Higher Ed content I've seen in this format is very impressive. Complete with color illustrations, maps, graphics, animations, these are a new form of teaching material, a step beyond what's currently done even in eBooks, let alone paper-published textbooks. And a label is being attached to some of these efforts, a label that will strike fear into the hearts of publishers and content sellers and have them reaching for their phones to call their lawyers — that label is **Open Source**....

We're at a crossover time in publishing, in reading, in teaching. While still (and continually) trying to get a handle on future directions, I can tell you this much with certainty: there will be no going back. The Rubicon is behind us.

We're in that moment I once described at a **Charleston Conference**, some several years ago. The Dinosaurs have ruled the Earth for a long, long time. They coexist with one another, albeit with the occasional outburst of lethal violence, "...red of tooth and claw."

At their feet scurry strange little creatures. They wear fur. Rather than laying eggs requiring long incubation, they give birth to live offspring. Their whole approach to things seem quite different from the way the Dinosaurs have been doing things — but it is not a matter of concern for Those Who Rule the Earth: these new creatures are very small. It's little wonder the Dinosaurs looks down at the new arrivals and say, "No problem: those won't amount to much..."

Do a **Google** search on "**Schwalb**: Ending Textbook Tyranny," from the *Yale Daily News*.

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