

THE INTERNATIONAL  
**JOURNAL**  
*Of* **THE BOOK**

Volume 8, Number 3

Textbooks: Changing Materiality, Changing  
Meaning

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF THE BOOK  
<http://www.Book-Journal.com>

First published in 2011 in Champaign, Illinois, USA  
by Common Ground Publishing LLC  
[www.CommonGroundPublishing.com](http://www.CommonGroundPublishing.com)

ISSN: 1447-9516

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGPublisher multichannel typesetting system  
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# Textbooks: Changing Materiality, Changing Meaning

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*Abstract: In a print-based society the physical characteristics of books not only controlled how knowledge was accessed, stored and disseminated, but also exerted a powerful unconscious influence over our perceptions about the status of knowledge. Textbooks, encyclopaediae, journals, comics and magazines were allocated status according to their material composition - for example, the amount of time it took to produce and disseminate the publication. The knowledge tools of Western pedagogy (textbooks) have traditionally been accorded powerful credibility and respectability because they were presented in tomes that imply content with enduring value. This pre-weighting of knowledge was difficult to discern in a print-based society but now, as meaning is increasingly digitally mediated, and teachers and learners are freed from the exigencies of print/textbook based knowledge, we are reassessing and reallocating our often unconscious perceptions of the status of knowledge. This paper examines the changing materiality of three sample pedagogical texts over a 16 year period in order to reveal, through an analysis of the changing dialectics in their material modes of representation, the epistemology embedded in each text. It then generalises these findings in order to shed light on the question: how does the changing materiality of texts shape our perceptions of knowledge.*

Keywords: Materiality, Mediation, Epistemology, Textbooks, Pedagogical Texts, Digitisation, Multimodality

## Introduction

**T**HE TEXTBOOK HAS long been a principal tool for storing and disseminating knowledge and, as such, has wielded a powerful influence on our epistemological and ontological assumptions. The composition, design, editing, production and distribution cycles associated with all printed texts are undergoing dramatic changes as major advances in digital technology profoundly affect every stage in these cycles. This paper is a comparative study of three pedagogical texts. It analyses how the consequent changing materiality of texts, particularly the process of digitisation, is challenging traditional assumptions about the truth claims implicit in these texts. The key theoretical lens underpinning this study is the belief that coming to know is a process of ‘the mutual shaping of tool and practice’ (Vygotsky, 1962). This paper uses Multimodal Discourse Analysis (a sub-theory of discourse analysis) to examine how our epistemological assumptions are shaped by materiality and to speculate how, as the materiality of our world is changing, what it means to know, and what we value as significant knowledge will change. This paper begins with a brief introduction to the key theoretical, methodological and historical ideas underpinning this paper. This is followed by an analysis of three specific pedagogical texts.

## Textbooks as Knowledge Shaping Tools

It is becoming increasingly difficult to find a comprehensive definition of a textbook as the physical form of textbooks is rapidly changing due to digitisation of production cycles and

content. For the purposes of this paper, in order to differentiate the texts that are the focus of this study, a textbook is defined as a formal text for instruction in a specific subject especially used as the full or partial basis of a course of study.

This study is underpinned by the claim that the material composition of our world shapes the discourses that mould our epistemological and ontological beliefs. It is important to note that the texts being examined in this comparative analysis are perceived in this paper, not as texts, but as artefacts. This distinction between texts and artefacts is crucial to an understanding of the theoretical approach of this analysis. A traditional analysis of the discourses in texts would reveal the, often unconscious, rhetorical intentions of the authors by examining the ideational content of the texts. However, in this paper I am taking a rather radical approach to discourse analysis by taking a three dimensional, located-in-the-lived-in-world perspective on discourse analysis and asking the question: *how does the physical composition of the texts impact on the meanings they mediate?*

A number of theorists have claimed that the medium of print has profoundly shaped Western epistemology. For example, Marshall McLuhan wrote over 45 years ago that the alphabet and the book are all media that shape our subconscious understanding. He claimed that each of these media has its own rules and conventions of meaning that result in a “total configurational awareness” (McLuhan, 1964/1994, p.7) which moulds our modes of cognition, our social structures and our institutions. In his claim that the medium is the message he stated that the changing materiality of our knowledge tools unconsciously influences our perception of the world to a far greater extent than our conscious consideration of the ideational content. He wrote that every “culture and age has its favourite model of perception and knowledge that it is inclined to prescribe for everybody and everything” (p.13), and that that favoured model of perception and knowledge was shaped by the dominant technology of the time. According to McLuhan in the age of mechanical industry the “private outlook” was the natural mode of expression whereas the electronic age is heralding an emerging world view of “wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness” and a “revulsion against imposed patterns” (p.13).

Mark Poster (1994) has also studied how the materiality of print technology has shaped our epistemological beliefs. According to Poster (1994), the 18<sup>th</sup> Century period of the Enlightenment – an intellectual tradition based entirely on the great theories of the modernist society, which “emphasised action and institutions over language and communication” (p. 377) – was a product of the primary communication technology of the time: print culture. According to Poster, the “spatial materiality, linear display of sentences, stability of words on page, systematic spacing of black letters on white background...” (pp. 377-378) all promoted the idea of the critical individual operating in isolation, making rational, thoughtful decisions.

Ong (1982) also claims that our beliefs are shaped by much more than the ideational context of texts, and that the form shapes both the meaning and what we perceive as valuable knowledge. Ong analyses the transition from an oral culture to a chirographic (writing) culture to a typographic (print culture), and the powerful impact these transitions in form have on epistemology. He claims that in an oral society, coming to know about something means achieving “close, empathetic, communal identification with the known” (p. 46), that oral societies lack the elaborate analytic categories that are evident in typographic societies, and that writing is essential to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience.

Street (1995) argues against Ong's (1982) idea of the Great Literacy Divide between oral and typographic cultures. However he does agree that the process of writing contains unspoken ideologies of power and alienation and that transferring ideas from one medium to another shifts the meaning at very deep epistemological levels "raising questions about truth, what is knowledge and what are sources of authority" (1995, p. 15). Street claims that the paralinguistic features embedded in writing are much more than mere transference of meaning from one medium to another. For example he states that "...when a piece of writing appears in an academic journal, its standing and the attitude the reader brings to it rests on more than 'lexicalization' alone: the status of the journal itself, even the quality and style of the paper and covers, all contribute to the 'meaning' of the propositions contained within it and to the degree of attention it is deemed to deserve from an 'academic' reader on the one hand or, on the other, whether it is worth a lay person bothering to look at all" (Street, 1995, p.170). In other words the ideational content of a professionally bound and well produced book with the imprint of a respected publishing house is perceived differently than a pile of A4 computer paper even though the content may be exactly the same.

### **Changing Modes—Changing Meaning**

The above theorists all agree that the materiality of print technology shapes our epistemological beliefs therefore, by assumption, as the materiality of textbooks is changing so are our epistemological assumptions. There is no doubt that the physical attributes of books are undergoing significant changes. Bezemer and Kress (2008), analysing textbook samples from 1935 to 2007, noted the changing modal connection and weighting between image and word, and speculated on the implications of this for pedagogical practice. They found that writing is no longer the central mode of representation in learning texts, and that significantly less writing and more images have been incorporated into the contemporary texts. Jewitt (2005) has also analysed the changing modes of representation between print and screen based technologies and concluded that the dominance of the written word is being challenged in contemporary pedagogical texts, and that this changing modal representation will impact on the ideational interpretation of the texts.

In order to investigate the discourses embedded in the three pedagogical artefacts being analysed (below) this paper uses Multimodal Discourse Analysis. This methodology claims that discourses are anchored in the particular properties of the physical world. Modal analysis provides a framework that allows us to closely analyse the unique physical form of each artefact, sort this range of sensory information into communicative sets (modes) and describe and compare the meaning-making properties of each set. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) originally perceived modes as visual communication on the two-dimensional printed page such as fonts, layout, white space and graphics. More recent theorists such as Norris (2004) take a broader time-referenced, three-dimensional approach to modal analysis. Norris claims that modal communication can be constructed with modal intensity and/or modal complexity. Modal complexity refers to the overall number of modes contributing to the composition of any text (or interaction); while modal intensity means the weight that each mode carries within the communicative act. The materiality of individual modes is shaped by the material and physical time cycles within which discourses operate. For example, print has traditionally had enduring materiality because the discourse cycles surrounding the production of printed

texts have involved large time scales and numerous layers of intervention as the text is shaped by the author, editor, publisher, printer, distributor, teacher and reader.

According to Norris (2004), the materiality of a mode is the extent to which that mode is capable of changing or mutating over time: its capacity for transformation. The modes of image and text have traditionally had “highly visible and extensively enduring materiality” (Norris, p. 9). This is changing as the technology associated with print production changes, and the producers of texts are increasingly able to exert greater control over the production process, giving them (and their readers) the technological potential to manipulate texts. The distance between those participating in the chain of print communication is reducing and this is altering the perceived stability and durability of printed texts. Poster describes this change in modal materiality as the “increasing volatility of written language, its instability and uncertain authorship” (1994, p 386). When Poster wrote this he was referring particularly to the move from the medium of print to the medium of digital texts, but this distinction is increasingly artificial because now almost all printed texts, at some point in their production cycle, are shaped by digital technology. This change in the materiality of print is subtly changing our epistemological perceptions of the status of printed knowledge, reducing the authority of the printed word and exposing its subjective nature.

## **A Comparison of Three Textbooks**

In order to shed light on the question: how does the *physical* composition of texts shape our perceptions of knowledge this paper compares three pedagogical texts that have been used in tertiary educational institutions during the past 16 years. The texts under comparison are Dwyer, J. (1993). *The business communication handbook* (3rd ed.). Sydney, Australia: Prentice Hall., DeVito, J. (2007). *Interpersonal communication*. (11th ed.). Boston, USA: Pearson. and Carl, J. (2010). *Think sociology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. The three texts are created for somewhat different tertiary educational markets and are therefore subject to different economic constraints: the Dwyer (1993) text is produced for the relatively small Australasian TAFE (technical and further education) market, and the DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts are produced for a larger international market. However the specific points discussed here are representative of the changes that are occurring within each of the selected textbooks, and also reflect the changes occurring in most contemporary print-based textbooks. The three texts are all broadly located within the domain of the social sciences: they are all concerned with the practices of interpersonal relationships, particularly how individuals communicate with and influence each other.

A comparison of the modal composition of the three sample texts shows marked differences in the way they present knowledge. The Dwyer (1993) text is more modally intense (Norris, 2004) using, almost exclusively, the modes of font and layout to express meaning and capture the attention of the reader. The text is absolutely devoid of colour, just black text on white paper, with limited use of grey-shading for emphasising chapter headings and for shading the occasional diagrams. There are only two fonts used in the entire text: Times New Roman and a cursive font that is used at the end of each chapter to differentiate the self-test questions. The text is devoid of all graphics although it does use three very small recurring organising symbols.

By contrast DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) use much more complex and varied modal arrangements to mediate meaning. On almost every page they use a wide range of colours,

a diverse array of fonts and font sizes, and an extremely varied and complex typography consisting of numerous overlapping frames, flow-charts, tables, graphs, symbols and stand-out boxes. Throughout both texts there is frequent use of full-colour photographs. Carl (2010) uses a contemporary magazine-style format on the front cover. This is a large glossy photograph of a beautiful, smiling, vibrant young woman wearing headphones. Her hair is blowing in the breeze. Prominent bolded headlines of the topics covered in the text are spaced around this photograph. These topic headlines are accompanied by page numbers to allow the reader to navigate directly to that point in the text. The topics featured on the cover (two of which are presented as questions) are not dissimilar to those that might be found on the cover of a women's magazine, for example 'Will I really get old like that? : Aging and my body. p.219' and (written in informal txt language) "Me & my "peeps": the ins and outs of group behaviour. p.104".

The varied modal composition of the three texts has significant implications for how we perceive knowledge acquisition. Vygotsky (1962) says that knowledge does not exist independently in the world but is individually constructed through our social experience, therefore the only intellectual concepts available to the learner are his or her own pre-established structures, and the only valid learning is learning that fits (or builds on) these established structures. Teachers intellectually agree that knowledge is constructed but the medium of print, and its product (the textbook), has traditionally actively undermined constructivist beliefs about learning. For example the fixed flow of meaning in the Dwyer (1993) text implicitly mediates a message that positions the reader as a passive recipient of knowledge. The modal composition shows a highly structured layout. The content is clearly ordered and arranged, and there is a pre-developed and highly directed reading path which dictates the flow of meaning. Hierarchical knowledge categories are clearly established. For example there are clearly defined sections and within each of these sections there are separate subsets that are clearly ordered; almost every section of text is prefaced with a distinct, bolded sub-heading. There is a carefully graduated arrangement of font sizes and bullet points which give a clear indication of the status of headings, and sub-headings. This modal intensity (Norris, 2004) privileges the idea that knowledge is pre-established and hierarchical, and that a focus on the central facts through a pre-established attention path will provide the most efficient route to understanding.

By contrast the layout of the DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts represent an increasing trend towards allowing the reader greater choice in the flow of their attention. In both of these texts the reader is invited to engage in the content in a much more haphazard, individual, intuitive way. For example in a single sample chapter (the chapter on listening) the DeVito (2007) text includes almost 30 frames, but the frames are indistinct (fine) and they regularly overlap in a somewhat random fashion. These rather chaotically arranged elements do not direct a specific flow of attention. Similarly the Carl (2010) text uses a modally complex mix of typographical devices such as standout boxes and info-graphics. In both texts there is very limited use of lexico-grammatical references such as pointers, connectors and explainers that specifically establish the connection among the various elements. This has the effect of mediating less explicit messages; of fragmenting and loosening the flow of meaning; and of stimulating exploratory interest in the problems posed rather than finding simplistic explanations and 'the right answer'. In other words the ease with which printing techniques have incorporated a wide range of modes is changing the text from an instructional tool that seeks primarily to inform readers to one where a number of implicit messages are subtly

mediated: confidence in the readers' right and ability to cope with the tensions between different perspectives and even embrace dilemmas; greater acceptance that learning involves readers constructing their own meanings and trust that the readers are competent to make their own choices (Mules, 2009).

New modal forms are unconsciously validating informal or personal knowledge. It was previously difficult and expensive to incorporate graphics into textbooks. Now with digital technology and the economics of larger print runs - as in the DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts - publishers can easily incorporate full colour images and justify the expense of licensing 3rd party content. The effect of incorporating images into texts has the effect of blurring the distinction between 'stories', personal experiences and factual content. While there are several text based case studies (stories) in the Dwyer (1993) text there are no images. By contrast the two contemporary texts make frequent use of full colour photographs. These are, in effect, stories expressed primarily through images. These stories are frequently based on fictional events derived from film and theatre. Some of the images are accompanied by explanatory text, some are not. For example, the opening page of the chapter on listening in the DeVito (2007) text is dominated by a large picture from the film *Cellular* (2004). The accompanying text (set in a coloured text box below the image) contextualises this image by explaining that it is sourced from a film about a woman desperately trying to locate someone who will listen to her and help find her missing son. The emotional anguish that is clearly visible on the woman's face encourages the reader to empathise with the woman's position. On the third page of the chapter there is an image of a dog and a man. The man's face is very close to the dog's ear, and he appears to be whispering to the dog which appears to be listening intently. No other explanation is given but there is an implicit reference to stories about close human connection with animals. In other words this incorporation of a wider range of meaning making modes, particularly photographs, is mediating a subconscious endorsement that emotionally charged personal stories and theoretical knowledge can sit comfortably alongside each other (Mules, 2009).

The technology and associated economics of the medium of print are influencing our perceptions of the durability of knowledge. Traditionally textbooks were written for an extended lifespan. This was economically motivated because each print run was so expensive that the producers of the text had to maximise the number of sales from each run to ensure sufficient return on their investment. In order to maximise the longevity of its relevance, the 1993 (Dwyer) textbook explicitly aims to appear chronologically neutral by stripping the text of almost all references that locate it with a particular timeframe, therefore there are no specific references to contemporary social issues in the text. Even in the few authentic case studies (for example in the chapter on leadership) there is only one generalized reference to time: 'through the 1990s' (Dwyer, p.577). The only other indicators that the knowledge in this text is located within a particular period of time are the dates in the very infrequent citations embedded in the text and the dates in the bibliography at the end of each chapter.

Now, even within the conventional textbook industry, very small print runs and 'just-in-time' production techniques mean the economic motivation behind extending the time between print runs has considerably reduced. The effect of this can be seen in the DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts where there is a gradual but clear loosening of the demands of durability: the texts make claims of freshness of content through frequent references to recent films, contemporary social issues, and contemporary media and political personalities. For example, the Carl (2010) text refers specifically to Barack Obama's 2008 election, the Beijing



Olympics and specific examples of how social media is changing the political power balance. Throughout the texts, frequent references are made to other theorists' research and writing, with the associated dates of their contributions integrally incorporated into the text. In other words both books firmly anchor their content in the present and are subtly mediating the idea that knowledge is not only a product of its social time but is ephemeral.

As tools of instruction and reference, textbooks traditionally frequently influenced what was legitimately included in a subject curriculum, and therefore what was excluded. The Dwyer (1993) text implicitly claims to be an authoritative, contained summary of the most useful points on the subject of communication within the business environment. The more complex modal architecture of the DeVito (2007) text and the Carl (2010) text are blurring subject demarcations: the boundaries between what appears to be included and excluded in a text are loosening. For example both texts contain frequent references to online adjuncts to knowledge, prompting the reader to go to [www.ablongman.com/devito](http://www.ablongman.com/devito) or [www.thethinkspot.com](http://www.thethinkspot.com) for further information. This has the effect of positioning the textbook as a portal or gateway through which more relevant knowledge can be accessed. The implication is that the field of knowledge is open-ended; there is recognition and acceptance of the idea that there are relevant contributions to the subject beyond the pages of the text and the reader is actively encouraged to pursue this supplementary knowledge.

Poster claims that the long established perception of the concreteness of the medium of print has been central to mediating the transition of content from "cultural works into monuments and authors into authorities" (1994, p. 385). The materiality of the texts has an impact on our perceptions of the durability and stability of the knowledge, and the authority of the author. Even over the relatively short period of 16 years changing print processes, changing environmental attitudes and economic constraints have contributed to differences in the binding, and the weight and texture of the stock on which the three books are printed. The 1993 text is more solidly bound, and the stock is heavier and has a more substantial feel. The paper that the DeVito (2007) and the Carl (2010) text are printed on is glossier and lighter. Clearly this is a response to cost constraints but the implicit message is that the lifespan of the knowledge expressed in the DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts is limited: the book and its ideational content are disposable. Changed perceptions of the durability of print are central to Poster's (1994) claims that changes to the materiality of the print medium will significantly impact on our beliefs about the credibility of texts and the authority of the authors of the texts (Mules, 2009).

Until the digital age, the processes of textual production and distribution, such as typography, were highly specialized occupations which involved lengthy production cycles. Poster (1994) says that the protracted stages of these cycles meant that texts were reshaped by interventions from editors, proofreaders and typesetters, and in this process the author lost connection, control and involvement with the original text. According to Poster (1994) these lengthy cycles contributed to the positivist tradition of authorial effacement (the idea that knowledge was objective and discovered rather than generated by the author) because this had the effect of positioning the author as being unbiased, ideologically neutral and situated outside the epistemological claims of the text. In the Dwyer (1993) text the author is almost completely invisible. She is featured as a name on the front cover of the book, there is a brief blurb about her on the back of the book and in the preface she thanks a number of contributors. In the body of the text no attention is drawn to her specific individual contribution or standpoint. The DeVito (2007) and Carl (2010) texts make the presence of the author

much more evident. For example, although DeVito still refers to himself in the third person, he frequently explicitly references himself within the text as just one theorist among many. The author's voice is even more evident in the Carl (2010) text. For example in the section on social capital he refers to his personal job hunting experiences (p. 109) and in his discussion on income distribution he talks about his experiences as a college student (p. 121). Therefore in both of the more recent texts there is greater recognition that the knowledge included in the textbook is a product of the author's unique experiences rather than an unassailable representation of the world.

## Conclusion

The textbook has been a primary pedagogical knowledge communication tool in the Western education system for the past 500 years. Changes in print technology mean that most classroom textbooks are using more complex and varied modal arrangements to mediate meaning. These changes of form were often incremental in the past but are occurring at an increasingly dramatic rate now that digital technology is being used at all stages of the production cycle. They are much more than just changes of form: they are blurring traditional dichotomies such as high and low, informal and formal, valid and invalid, personal and theoretical, current and outdated knowledge. This blurring is leading to a reevaluation of our perceptions of knowledge and opening the way for validation of alternative forms of knowledge.

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<b>HUMANITIES</b> The International Journal of the Humanities Website: <a href="http://www.Humanities-Journal.com">www.Humanities-Journal.com</a>	<b>IMAGE</b> The International Journal of the Image Website: <a href="http://www.OntheImage.com/journal">www.OntheImage.com/journal</a>
<b>LEARNING</b> The International Journal of Learning. Website: <a href="http://www.Learning-Journal.com">www.Learning-Journal.com</a>	<b>MANAGEMENT</b> The International Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Change Management. Website: <a href="http://www.Management-Journal.com">www.Management-Journal.com</a>
<b>MUSEUM</b> The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum Website: <a href="http://www.Museum-Journal.com">www.Museum-Journal.com</a>	<b>RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY</b> The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society Website: <a href="http://www.Religion-Journal.com">www.Religion-Journal.com</a>
<b>SCIENCE IN SOCIETY</b> The International Journal of Science in Society Website: <a href="http://www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com">www.ScienceinSocietyJournal.com</a>	<b>SOCIAL SCIENCES</b> The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Website: <a href="http://www.SocialSciences-Journal.com">www.SocialSciences-Journal.com</a>
<b>SPACES AND FLOWS</b> Spaces and Flows: An International Journal of Urban and ExtraUrban Studies Website: <a href="http://www.SpacesJournal.com">www.SpacesJournal.com</a>	<b>SPORT AND SOCIETY</b> The International Journal of Sport and Society Website: <a href="http://www.sportandsociety.com/journal">www.sportandsociety.com/journal</a>
<b>SUSTAINABILITY</b> The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability Website: <a href="http://www.Sustainability-Journal.com">www.Sustainability-Journal.com</a>	<b>TECHNOLOGY</b> The International Journal of Technology, Knowledge and Society Website: <a href="http://www.Technology-Journal.com">www.Technology-Journal.com</a>
<b>UBIQUITOUS LEARNING</b> Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal Website: <a href="http://www.ubi-learn.com/journal/">www.ubi-learn.com/journal/</a>	<b>UNIVERSITIES</b> Journal of the World Universities Forum Website: <a href="http://www.Universities-Journal.com">www.Universities-Journal.com</a>

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