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## EDITORIAL

# Workplace Communication from a Wider Angle

The fall 2019 Bulletin brings an assortment of articles by authors whose communication work pertains to business activity for an array of purposes from a variety of perspectives. The opening article by Gerald Alred takes a long view of textbooks in our field. Working on this article with Professor Alred has been a pleasure and our conversation raised some very interesting questions. Has the textbook author’s compensation changed proportionate to the increased cost of the textbooks for students? How do the textbook rentals available from online bookstores affect this market? Who is benefiting from the rentals besides the students who do not want to purchase a book? How does the trend toward selling portions of an eBook to students—in case their instructor is only assigning a selection—affecting the integrity of a book? Who gains and who loses from these “sliced and diced” chapters? Alred shared that such practices might work against theoretically-based, coherent and unified approaches.

Changing classroom practices also raise some interesting questions about the use of textbooks. For example, we do not know how many instructors are using traditional textbooks in their flipped classrooms and how often. For example, those of us whose programs stress the use of learning management systems (LMS), our students read the assigned business and technical communication book chapters, post their reading responses on the LMS discussion boards for one another with the instructors mostly lurking on the side, and the instructors focus on only those aspects of the reading in class which students thought were not as clear to them. Most of the in class time is used for applying the textbook concepts to workplace problems in the form of cases or scenarios.

Katherine Breward’s teaching case on workplace interview practices is the first article about disability in the Bulletin—an often neglected topic in business-oriented publications—and we hope that our readers will try to engage themselves, their students, and employees in training sessions with the questions raised in this case relating societal and workplace responses to autistic employees. To extend this dialog about disability in the workplace, we invite commentaries in response to this Canadian piece from our readers which will be published in the spring 2020 issue. We would also like to know how your teaching of this case went in your classes.

Eugene Sivadas’ article on marketing channels gives an insight into the problems caused for sellers by their use of old and new communication technologies and channels—face-to-face selling in brick-and-mortar stores and through the online portals. From the perspective of business communication profession, this omni-channel world seems to have opened new niches for consulting and communication strategy work in marketing.

Mikel Chertudi’s interview with Allison Gabriel gives a fascinating view of the gender complications in the contemporary workplace—complications, in fact, resulting from the increased presence of women in the leadership

positions but not enough to go around for all the women employees. Marianna Richardson's article on changing motivation theories draws attention to motivation methods that workers do not perceive as manipulation by their supervisors and want to adopt of their own volition. Sabrina Pasztor's interview with Cynthia Heller Alt demonstrates how consulting expertise is relevant to business communication courses and how it could benefit our students.

Mollie Hartup and Amy Cossentino's Study of students in a college honors program presents important findings that point toward email communication strategies that promote student development and success. Andrew Ogilvie advises students to write reader-centered messages that meet their needs.

Last, this issue includes a call for commentaries from our readers who have been affected by the recent budget cuts for higher education. We hope that you share your perspectives for the special feature on this topic in the spring 2020 Bulletin.

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# ABC West



## FEATURED

# Reflections on Textbooks: Past and Future

Gerald J. Alred, Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Textbooks have been traditionally ignored or generally taken for granted by the public and the media. But in recent years, textbooks and textbook publishing have become the subject of widespread discussion. In July 2019, *Inside Higher Ed* reported the following development at Pearson Education, one of the largest textbook publishers:

“ Pearson, like many publishers in higher education, has long signaled its intent to move from print textbooks to digital courseware. But today the company went farther than anyone else — announcing that all of its 1,500 U.S. titles will become “digital first.” From now on, instead of publishing new editions of print textbooks every few years, the publisher will focus its energy on its digital course materials. These digital materials will be updated on an ongoing basis — reflecting new research developments, technology breakthroughs and the latest pedagogical trends (Lindsay 2019).

What this comment does not reflect is that textbook publishers like Pearson have, in fact, struggled to adapt for a good number of years and experimented with various alternatives for delivering their products. For example, they have created custom versions of textbooks sold from campus bookstores, published textbooks in digital form for which students pay for an access code, and recently began renting textbooks directly to students through local agents like bookstores. These efforts and others have attempted to lower costs and reduce the need to publish new editions of print textbooks every three years. In a related shift, publishers have reduced their presence at conferences. At one conference I have regularly attended, the exhibit areas have shrunk substantially and gatherings sponsored by publishers have either been reduced in size or eliminated. In many disciplines, including business and professional writing, I have heard faculty report that students simply will not buy textbooks.

But the concern about costs is not entirely new. I recall as a student that many of us stood in line at the college bookstore and, even then, complained about the cost of textbooks, especially outside our major fields. I started in engineering and still have a copy of the third edition of Thomas’ classic *Calculus and Analytic Geometry* published by Addison-Wesley (1960). Because I switched majors to writing and communication, I also saved from an advanced writing course the third edition of Perrin’s *Writers Guide and Index to English* published by Scott, Foresman (1959).

The copyright pages of these classic texts reveal that six years separated editions for both books. That contrasts

with the past twenty years, at least, for which the revision cycle has been generally three years. This revision cycle has been spurred not simply by the development of new knowledge, but by the massive used book industry that provides cheaper copies of textbooks on the heels of the initial publication of a new edition. In fact, I have seen used copies of my own books for sale during the very same semester the new edition was produced. How can a “used book” be available when there was no time for it to be used? One publisher joked that perhaps someone hijacked shipments from the printers!

Publishers face substantial editorial and production investments on new editions. So, given the short window for new editions to recover costs, publishers have priced textbooks accordingly. Authors, of course, have no control over either the price or the revision cycle since traditional contracts have specified that revisions are based on the publisher’s determination that a new edition is needed. Authors’ percentages of sales may remain the same, but no royalties are paid on the sale of used books — and best-selling textbooks are as rare as the proverbial unicorn. A would-be author today should think carefully if the benefits in royalties and reputation will pay enough to justify the extraordinary time and effort to produce a textbook.

Two major forces, then, have been driving change: (1) the high initial cost of textbooks and (2) the easy availability of not only used print textbooks but also free online materials. Some suggest that the first is the cause of the second, but others argue it’s just the opposite — the high cost creates the need for students to search for alternatives online, use older editions, or simply avoid textbooks altogether. This debate might reflect a chicken and egg paradox, but perhaps both are true.

Regardless of the causes, however, any changes as substantial as those of Pearson and many other publishers is bound to produce some benefits, but it may also cause us to lose some important values. As an author of traditional textbooks, non-traditional handbooks as well as scholarly works over my academic career, perhaps I can offer a few useful observations. I base them in part on an article I co-authored, “Are Textbooks Contributions to Scholarship?” in *College Composition and Communication* (1993).

In that article, my coauthor and I argued that a composition and professional writing textbook can transmit both pedagogy and the theoretical stance of the author. We asserted that “When someone asks, ‘What text are you using for that course at your school?’ the answer often defines the course, the program philosophy, and perhaps even the institution in the mind of the questioner” (Alred & Thelen, 470).

We also gave examples of a number of scholars who demonstrated that textbooks on writing have transmitted new theory since such textbooks can be rhetorical as well as pedagogical products. We concluded that “it seems wrongheaded to unquestioningly accept a common view that [textbooks] *cannot* be scholarly contributions.” We concluded that “if we raise the stakes for textbook publishing, we will foster textbooks that can serve as sites where theory, practice, and pedagogy will transform- and reform-one another. And we will foster textbooks that represent the best of our scholarly labor” (Alred & Thelen, 476).

What values could be lost in the changes Pearson and other publishers propose? The rich background of a unified pedagogical approach and a coherent theoretical underpinning are core values that we may lose when “digital materials are updated on an ongoing basis — reflecting new research developments, technology breakthroughs and the latest pedagogical trends.”

What benefits could be gained from such a change? There are unquestionable benefits to be gained from robust digital materials that might infuse textbooks in whatever form they take. Audio, video, and links to sophisticated materials not available in printed textbooks may engage modern students and enrich the classroom. I developed an archival website (InlandChorus.com) that is far richer than is possible for any print book on my subject because the website is enhanced by audio files, videos, photos, articles, and a public forum for comments. I can imagine that a rich and robust digital “textbook” would have similar benefits to offer students. But from my experience, it also

seems clear that digital textbooks with compilations and material that can be updated and individualized will put more demands on the time of the “author” and instructors.

We pointed out a similar issue for print textbooks. We worried about the logical development of custom publishing, the “feature-driven” textbook, already evident in the speed with which fashionable topics were being grafted onto new editions. To demonstrate our point, we provided a composite preface that might be typical (updated here):

“*TITLE is a comprehensive and flexible textbook for a business communication course. Rhetorical principles are explained, illustrated, and applied to a variety of assignments, which are based on the best contemporary theory and practice in the teaching of writing. New to this edition is the coverage of FEATURE, FEATURE, and FEATURE. Part Two helps students understand how they can produce effective writing for a wide range of situations. Part Three, “The Handbook,” covers the essentials of grammar, usage, and mechanics.*

But what theory? What practice? What situations? Are the new “features” compatible with the author’s philosophy? What is the author’s philosophy? What are the author’s theoretical assumptions? What methodology lies behind the text? Where is the author’s voice? The desire to make a textbook infinitely flexible and appeal to the widest possible market seduces publishers, editors, and even authors to construct such prefaces. In a digital environment where materials can be added at hyper-speed these questions would seem an even greater concern. In this future taken to the extreme, the term “textbook” may even become obsolete.

It may be helpful to look beyond the U.S. to another university system that may give a glimpse of a future without traditional textbooks — or textbooks altogether.

I taught at a university in Germany for three semesters over ten years (1994, 1998, and 2004). For many reasons, some of which I describe in an article about my experience, there is no “textbook industry” in Germany (Alred, 1997).

My German colleagues used lecture together with selected print or digital materials rather than textbooks for students. Classroom reading materials were gathered and developed by an individual instructor and for those students in a specific class — the ultimate in “custom publishing”!

Before my first semester as a visiting professor, however, I ordered copies of my book, *The Business Writer’s Handbook* (2019), co-authored with Brusaw & Oliu, for the university bookstore.

When I arrived, I was surprised to find in the bookstore only two copies of the Handbook at twice the price it would cost in the U.S. Even more surprising was my first day in class when I saw students with copies of neatly bound together pages that were literally photocopies of the Handbook (all 732 pages). As I learned then and in later visits, U.S. books imported to Germany were very expensive and ideas of copyright are quite different. Students during my first visit would stand at the copy machines making copies of articles, chapters of books, and even whole books on reserve. During my first visit, I purchased a mug at a bookstore with a cartoon of a frazzled student at a copy machine and the words above “Kopieren geht über Studieren” (a popular German student joke that translates roughly “Copying is about studying”).



### Kopieren geht über Studieren

During my later visits the students copied mostly digital materials. But the mug demonstrates their perspective of copyright then and one that continues to today.

One class I taught to German students who were roughly equivalent to doctoral students in the U.S. was a course I'd taught at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee: "Theory and Pedagogy of Professional Writing." Because I wanted to have them understand the pedagogical approaches in the U.S., I shipped before I arrived copies of a number of the best-selling business communication textbooks from the U.S. The students evaluated the textbooks and gave reports to the class. I was somewhat surprised that my German students (all English majors) loved the U.S. textbooks and told me they wished they'd been able to get them for their own university classes in Germany. They liked the high production values in these books — four colors and the like. They even liked the personal touch in one textbook with a photo of the author and her personal statement to students.

An interesting question from a student reflected the differences in universities in the U.S. and in Germany. The student observed that "these business communication textbooks often have grammar reviews as a last section." She said, "I know why we, as Germans, might need an English grammar review — but why would students born and educated in the U.S. need such a section?" Answering that question required some careful explanation about major differences in the U.S. university system and the traditional German system. But it also offers an example of why

textbooks are important and why authors need to provide framing and context.

The German students were assiduous note takers because they were tested at the end of their university course work on what they learned in each course. One student told me that “it’s like taking a course twice!” Having a textbook in a course, they felt, would allow them to review for the final university examinations more easily.

Perhaps it is understandable, then, that my German students demonstrated impressive abilities to read carefully and recall specifics from a wide variety of materials. They often noticed very minor points in scholarly articles from our journals. Indeed, I was surprised that several students said that scholarly articles from the U.S. are easier to read (and “reader friendly”) than scholarly articles they read from German sources.

My observation was that without textbooks and standard campus-wide courses, German professors and instructors must spend substantial time to assemble their materials and then communicate directly to students the underpinnings of those readings and materials. What we might refer to as undergraduate courses in the U.S. required preparation much more like that for graduate courses in the U.S. Instructors for those courses need to work closely with senior faculty and others as they prepare to maintain consistency across the courses and over time. Instructors were often post-doctoral students working on a “habilitation” to qualify for a university professorship elsewhere. The university also hired ad hoc lecturers (some from the U.S.), but they were hired for two-year appointments and often worked closely with the faculty.

The point is that if textbooks are essentially eliminated in the U.S, the preparation and work of program administrators who must hire adjunct faculty at the last minute would increase substantially. They might need to develop detailed teaching materials to guide the adjunct instructors. And they, or someone they might assign, would need to spend many hours coaching and monitoring the newly hired adjuncts. Indeed, without carefully detailed or locally developed lesson plans, the quality of teaching will likely decline.

The U.S. university system has been built with the idea that textbooks help ensure the content of undergraduate courses. Some students still save textbooks from courses in their major well after a semester, even though they may not face German university examinations. My former editor and college director at St. Martin’s Press, Thomas Broadbent, once told me that he thought “sometimes a textbook can save a course for students regardless of tangents taken by an instructor.”

In the “brave new world” of composite, component, infinitely customizable, and endlessly updated digital textbooks, we may want to consider carefully the long-term use of textbooks. Publishers and program directors may need ensure that, whatever form they take, textbooks do not lose coherent and theoretically-based, unified approaches. If textbooks are essentially lost, then campuses need to re-deploy resources to allow program directors to function essentially as “textbook authors” who will ensure that courses remain theoretically coherent and unified. Finally, I’m concerned that in a fluid digital environment that the idea of intellectual ownership and copyright does not become peripheral and fall victim to the quest for the latest pedagogical trends.

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