



# HOW TO CREATE **INTERACTIVE** COURSE CONTENT

A HANDBOOK FOR PROFESSORS

BY PHILIP PREVILLE





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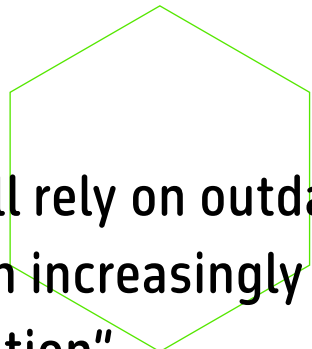
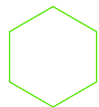


# THE PAPER PARADOX

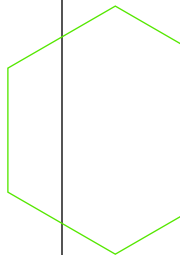
The college classroom is the last oasis of the printed page. No one reads newspapers on paper anymore. Novels are read on Kindles and Kobos. Magazine and journal articles are all available online and easily shared. Social media provides crowd-curated links that can bring anyone up-to-date on the latest developments in any field. But still today, as post-secondary students enter class and unpack their tablets and laptops, they also pull textbooks and binders from their backpacks.

The scene at any student's desk these days is like oil and water. Their focus is on the technology: it's where they enter their notes on classroom lectures, it's where they invariably begin their research for any course project and it's where they'll bring data and ideas together into analytical thinking. But they've also got reams of printed information they must integrate into their learning, even though it can't be integrated into their learning tools.





# "Professors still rely on outdated print materials for an increasingly digital-native student population"



This lack of integration manifests itself in myriad ways. First, it has an effect on learning outcomes and student success: While some students move effortlessly between print and digital media, others find it a challenge. Indeed, the National Survey of Student Engagement found that many students actively avoid textbook purchases, or at least delay them in the hope they can succeed without having to spend any money.

Then there's the impact upon professors themselves, who devote increasing amounts of time and effort to supplement textbook readings with more up-to-date course packs and other materials. Nevertheless, they still rely upon print materials for an increasingly digital-native student population.

One recent study found that students use digital devices in the classroom 11 times per day for non-learning purposes. Another found that increased cell phone use in the classroom correlated with decreased academic performance. Drawbacks aside, the technology is here to stay. The challenge, for professors, is to make that technology a more effective tool for learning.



# THE CREEPING OBSOLESCENCE OF TRADITIONAL TEXTBOOKS

For an increasing number of disciplines, printed textbooks can't keep pace with change. New technologies are having transformational impacts and are moving faster than the once-every-five-years textbook update. For some areas of study, print has simply become ill-suited to the digital dominance of the field, and the Internet and social media are now the focus of endeavor.

Over time, as professors modify and refresh their courses, they may find themselves relying less on a foundational tome and more on the supplemental materials they develop themselves. And they update the content continuously. Gone are the days when the same

set of lecture notes could be used three years in a row.

Any professor who's been regularly teaching a course of his or her own design likely has enough material to author their own textbook. At the very least, the work amounts to a substantial number of chapters, complete with web links, supplemental video, data sets, pop quizzes, discussion topics, case studies and exams.

And at that point, given all the work that's been done—and given the shortcomings of traditional textbooks, not to mention students' avoidance of them—there's a compelling case for an educator to produce his or her own electronic textbook.





## 2

# PATHWAYS TO PUBLISHING, OLD AND NEW

The print textbook publishing industry is deeply entrenched in academia. It's also a rigidly structured business model, one that has limited room for products from a select number of authors. If you are not already an established textbook author, it can be a challenge just to get your foot in the door. Editors habitually solicit new textbooks based upon their company's perception of market needs, and they're known to turn to already published authors with successful track records.

Unsolicited textbooks from

new authors, meanwhile, typically make up a minority share of editors' active projects. And it can be hard to get their attention. They'll require a detailed proposal that includes descriptions of a textbook's market and its competition, as well as sample chapters. And even the perfect proposal will get overlooked if it simply lands in an editor's inbox without warning.

Even if a proposal is accepted, the author's initial impulse—to create a foundational text that will help students learn better—can get



lost in the machinery of publication. The traditional publishing cycle typically commits authors to a production timeline that extends beyond a full year. And the end product falls into the same traps—rapid obsolescence and prohibitive cost.

Digital textbook publishing, on the other hand, does not have the same barriers to authorship or legacy production processes as traditional publishing. Platforms including Top Hat also provide opportunities for complete digital integration of existing course content, and give professors full control over their content.

- ◊ Unlike print, digital publishing has fewer barriers. There are shorter lead times, and no years-long production process.
- ◊ The primary gatekeepers are the authors themselves: if they're confident in their material and its ability to find a market, then the tools to organize, peer-review and publish it in a digital marketplace are at their disposal.

- ◊ The interactive features of e-textbooks typically extend far beyond hyperlinks; authors are able to embed web pages, videos, maps, audio and other material directly within their text, to ensure full continuity for engaged students.
- ◊ Most digital textbook platforms offer online support, helping authors navigate the tech and sort out any kinks as they arise.
- ◊ Through e-publishing, professors can publish their material in a variety of forms, from topic-specific modules through project assignment packs to full interactive textbooks.
- ◊ Online textbooks typically offer substantial cost advantages for students, and superior royalty percentages for authors.

Digital publishing puts your learning materials where your students' attention is focused: onscreen, making full use of the technology that students already rely upon for their learning.



### 3

## PUTTING YOUR DIGITAL TEXTBOOK IDEA INTO ACTION

If you think you have an idea that's worth pursuing, there are a few basic steps you can take to ensure its success.

### STEP #1

#### **ASSESS THE CURRENT MARKET**

Before you start creating and uploading digital textbook content, survey the market as you would for any textbook proposal. Browse the existing e-textbook offerings. How crowded is your field? Will your book bring a new and unique perspective to the discussion? The answers to these questions will help you tailor your content

to students' existing needs and improve your chances of success.

### STEP #2

#### **DEVELOP AN OUTLINE**

Start by drafting a Table of Contents, with proposed chapter titles and subtitles, and then expand upon it to give yourself a reliable blueprint to use when you get down to writing. Ideally, chapter titles clearly communicate the central idea at the heart of each section of your book. Keep in mind that the Table of Contents is often a sell sheet for your book, something other professors will look at when

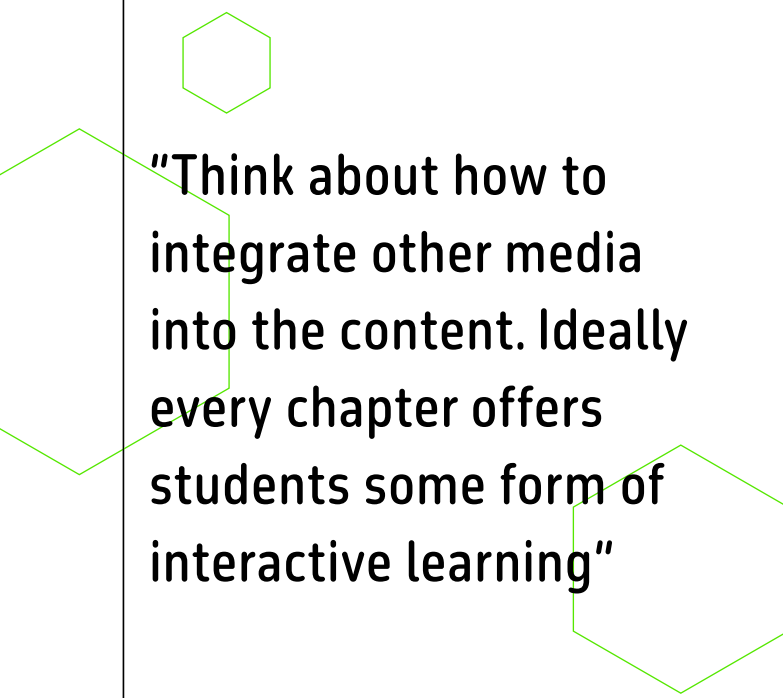


deciding whether to assign your textbook for their courses.

### STEP #3

#### **PLAN FOR MULTIMEDIA CONTENT AND COMPREHENSION QUIZZES**

The ability to fully integrate other media into your content is one of the greatest advantages of e-publishing. It's also a big part of



**"Think about how to integrate other media into the content. Ideally every chapter offers students some form of interactive learning"**

how your work will keep students actively engaged, so it's important to plan for it. From your detailed outline, determine where you will add supplemental video and audio. Be creative with embedded

data and virtual problem-solving exercises. Plan for regular and consistent insertions of quizzes and discussion questions. Ideally, every chapter offers students some form of interactive learning.

### STEP #4

#### **ASSEMBLE YOUR WORK AND GATHER FEEDBACK**

Now it's time to add flesh to the detailed skeleton of your outline. Top Hat's platform makes it easy for authors to embed multimedia materials right into the text. As authors complete chapters, they can also solicit feedback from students and peers on its structure, utility and effectiveness, and incorporate that feedback into the writing of subsequent chapters.

### STEP #5

#### **MAKE IT LIVE!**

Whether an author has created a pack of multimedia reading material, quizzes, assignments or a full digital textbook that incorporates all of these elements, making it available to students and other educators (and engaging in some shameless self-promotion) is the final step.



# DIGITAL PUBLISHING SUCCESS STORIES

Instructors of undergraduate courses all hope to captivate and spur a student's desire to learn, and instill an interest in the department or subject. History professor Sarah Eskridge of Randolph-Macon College achieves this by making her teaching material as sticky and engaging as possible using an interactive digital textbook that she co-authored for the Top Hat platform. Augmenting the copy with embedded primary source audio and video, interactive timelines and live learning feedback (like multiple choice or short answer questions right in the reading) entices her students, and including automatic grading and full customizability makes it


attractive to other professors.

"The more I use it, the more I like it," says Eskridge. "I keep discovering new features. And it's great for getting students to participate in class. They ask more questions, they're intrigued and delighted by the interactive features. It really adds value to the content in a way that traditional teaching materials don't. And I can keep track of what students are reading and the exercises they're completing outside of class."

Christopher Bone, assistant professor of Geographic Information Science at the University of Oregon, works in a world of digital maps. "I used to tell students, 'click here,



click there, do this, do that' so they became good at following instructions," he says. "And I think that's an analogy of how we approach education. We're producing students who are good



**"We're producing students who are good at doing what they're told to do, but they're not good at solving problems on the fly"**

at doing what they're told to do, but they're not good at solving problems on the fly, which is what they'll be expected to do as soon as they enter the job market."

Bone's answer to this challenge was to design, with his colleague, professor Amy Lobben, an interactive textbook called *Our Digital Earth*. Students love the textbook's conversational tone,

the embedded questions, the videos and the games (like an earthquake preparedness exercise where students integrate their geospatial analysis with mapping skills, social media and unstructured data). They also love that the cost of the digital course material is about half of an average print textbook. Bone recently presented this textbook at a conference, and other campuses, like the University of Tennessee and the University of Miami, have adopted the course material.

The textbook emphasizes Bone's key teaching philosophy: equip students with the fundamentals and then push them to be adaptive, flexible and nimble with the content. "Unfortunately, many of us still teach in this very conventional way: here is a set of materials, and we're going to test you on that—essentially absorbing and repeating information," says Bone. "But if we give students a real problem and the means to collect real data, without the expectation that every student will produce the same thing, then we've set them up for success beyond the classroom walls."





## CONCLUSION

# THE NEW AUTHORSHIP

In higher education, digital disruption is not just about the technological upheaval that changes the way colleges do business; the term also relates to the distraction and disengagement of students in the classroom whose course materials are incompatible with their wired lifestyle.

Platforms like Top Hat offer professors the opportunity to make their foundational course materials more useful for today's students—and to market them to other professors. It also allows them to bypass traditional publishing processes and structures and take up the role of authorship in their field. And getting started on this new career dimension is just a few clicks away. 📱



## THE AUTHOR

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