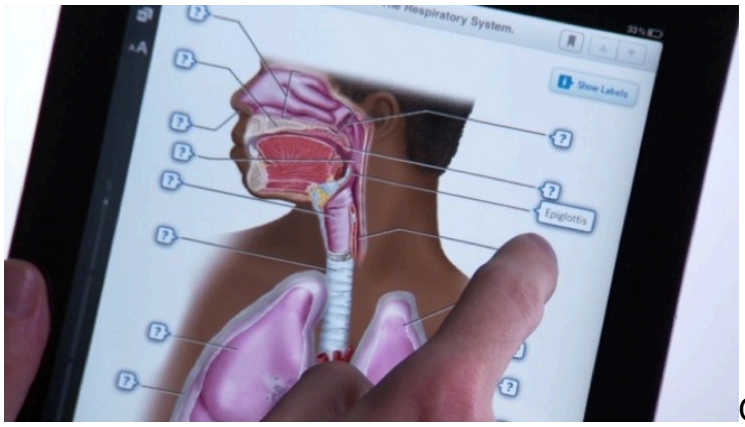
Apple’s New iBooks Won’t School College Bookstores Any Time Soon



On its face, matching iPad textbooks with college students seems almost perfect. But Apple’s plans for its new iBookstore, from the way it has structured book purchases to its development strategy for multimedia e-books, doesn’t seem like it’s well suited for the college textbook market at all — if it even has that target in mind.

To be fair, Apple’s presentation at its education event last Thursday was overwhelmingly focused on the K-12 market. Phil Schiller diagnosed a handful of this system’s maladies: low rates of high school graduation, overcrowded public school classrooms, and the United States’ position relative to the rest of the world in K-12 educational achievement. The prescription? iPads — with multimedia textbooks sold through iBooks, created in iBooks Author and, augmented with syllabi and podcasts through iTunes U. Apple and its publishing partners even showed off new digital science textbooks for high school students.

But there are serious obstacles even with bringing Apple’s iPads and iBooks into primary and high schools, let alone them having a substantially positive impact there. The best overview of the market Apple’s is entering is probably Laura Hazard Owen’s “What Apple Is Wading Into: A Snapshot Of The K-12 Textbook Business.” Meanwhile, Audrey Watters cuts sharply into the shortcomings of Apple’s economic implications for schools in “Apple and the Digital Textbook Counter-Revolution.” And I wrote about the complex requirements both textbook publishers and electronic technology must meet in order to be used in institutions as multi-layered and multi-regulated like public schools — complexity that even made Steve Jobs once doubt whether technology could be used to “fix” education.

University professors, along with other experts and stakeholders in the college textbook market, are even more skeptical. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Pomona College professor and director of scholarly communication for the Modern Language Association, was troubled by the limited view of interactivity modeled in the new iBooks — interaction between a student and a screen, not students with one another — as well as the limitation of these new textbooks to only Apple’s platform

and format.

Multi-platform support is especially an issue in colleges and universities, since, as digital publishing expert and ex-Encyclopaedia Britannica CEO Joseph Esposito notes, college students typically purchase their own computing hardware, rather than the institution. For this reason, Esposito believes adoption of iBooks would take longer in college than K-12, except in some contexts where the institution either mandates the purchase of specific devices or supplies them directly to students. Even if Apple’s publishing partners — who, let’s not forget, have a brisk business selling to college and university bookstores too — make a big push into the college marketplace through iBooks, professors may be reluctant to assign digital copies only to students if it requires them to buy an iPad costing $500 or more.

Battle of the business models: straw purchases versus volume licensing

Inkling CEO (and former Apple education employee) Matt MacInnis doesn’t currently make content for all platforms; Inkling makes multimedia college textbooks (Inkling calls them “Smartbooks”) exclusively for the iPad, with many of the same textbook partners now developing products for the new iBooks. (McGraw-Hill and Pearson are both investors in Inkling.) But as Inkling moves toward a cross-platform future, MacInnis still thinks Inkling still has a solid advantage over Apple when it comes to serving colleges and universities, even on the iPad.

“Over time, in K-12, Apple and the iPad will be the leader,” MacInnis told Wired. “Apple is building that ecosystem by hook or by crook. But that won’t be the case in the higher education market.”

At most colleges and universities today, textbooks are selected by professors and instructors, ordered by campus bookstores, then purchased by students. But most digital resources — database subscriptions, image, video and audio collections, plus electronic news sources and medical, scientific and scholarly journals — are purchased by universities, generally hosted and/or managed through college libraries.

MacInnis believes that at colleges and universities, this kind of bulk purchasing — or really, bulk subscription-based licensing — is the most likely emerging model for electronic textbooks, too. Every student (or some subset enrolled in a course) would have university-paid electronic access to the textbook as long as they are students.

Inkling has sold textbooks to University of California, Irvine through a bulk institutional purchase, with Irvine then assigning license numbers to students. California State-Northridge paid for a university-wide site license to Nature Publishing’s Principles of Biology digital textbook last year. UC-Berkeley, Cornell, Virginia, and the universities of Minnesota and Wisconsin-Madison are currently collectively piloting a program licensing textbooks published by McGraw-Hill. At Brown University, another of Inkling’s institutional partners, medical students are required to purchase both iPads and three Inkling textbooks; here, MacInnis says, an institutional licensing model would be natural.

So Apple’s model for iBooks, at least in the K-12 context, asks schools to buy iPads, plus individual textbook licenses for each student. It’s a straw purchase, made and paid for by the institution, but on the student’s behalf. Every book is associated with a unique Apple ID — that currently, at least, has to be assigned to a single person — so every student has access to his or her textbooks forever. Meanwhile, colleges and universities have been moving toward a purchasing model that arguably makes *more* sense in K-12: volume licenses for textbooks held on a subscription basis by the institution, not the student.

Students may buy iPads and then buy textbooks from Apple, particularly if their institution and teachers encourage them to do so. But they’re much less likely to if there is already a multiplatform textbook that’s provided by the university.

The problem of plenitude: How many books does your bookstore carry?

Barnes & Noble knows the college bookstore market very well. Its College division does half as much business as the retail division — and the numbers are much closer in quarters when semesters begin. It’s also sold e-textbooks since 2003.

“Back then, we could barely sell one to anybody,” B&N College VP Jade Roth told Wired. “There wasn’t enough content, the tech wasn’t ready, and the students weren’t ready.”

One of the biggest problems with the textbook market, Roth says — and one which puts Apple or any company hoping to develop many enhanced or multimedia textbooks — are the sheer number of books selected for college courses. A K-12 classroom or even a school district may be able to get by with a small number of subject texts, They’ll be selected at the district level, standardized by state boards or the new U.S. Common Core curriculum, and all of the big textbooks will sell plenty of copies.

For college, Roth says, professors assign — and Barnes & Noble sells — 210,000 unique titles in textbooks alone. Add in the wider universe of trade books — college classes like Plato’s Republic or Moby Dick, and the number goes up to 2.5 million. These come from textbook publishers, big trades, small and independent presses, university presses, cheap mass-market editions, and more. With so many books, covering such a wide range of subject matter, published by so many presses, it’s extraordinarily difficult to make a comprehensive move to digital. It’s not quite on the scale of Google Books’ digitization of university library holdings, but arguably closer to that than partnering up to sell half a dozen high school science textbooks from three different publishers.

This is why Barnes & Noble has generally opted for simpler copies of digital textbooks, augmented with its multiplatform NOOK Study textbook reading and note-taking application. It’s fashionable to slam publishers and retailers for selling what are sometimes called glorified PDFs. Still, between those copies and E Ink, this is the easiest and most effective way to get enough titles available that professors can order what they want, and students can buy what they need.

Roth sees growth in digital textbooks as part of a broader transformation in the economics of the college textbook industry. “Within the last years, we’ve had an explosion in print rentals, which profoundly changed how college bookstores worked,” she says. (Chegg is probably the best-known textbook rental company — it, too, is now also working with e-textbooks — but Barnes & Noble’s college bookstores added rentals as an option fairly quickly.)

“It’s a great time for college bookstores, because we now have many more options for cost-effective learning materials,” Roth says. “The professor still chooses the material, but students can choose to buy or rent either print or digital copies of the same book. When we give the students more options at more price points, they like us better.”

That emphasis on consumer choice isn’t just plain vanilla, free-market ideology; it reflects the basic heterogeneity of college students — and even colleges themselves. “Remember, these students come from all different worlds,” Roth says. “In a lecture hall of 250 students, all with different economic concerns, one might have an iPad, another a PC, another a print rental…. We’re moving into a digital world, but we have a long way to go.”

Most likely, that digital world won’t be one world, with one kind of reader; another strike against Apple, iPad and iBooks.

The born-digital future

“The challenges of transforming the education market make transforming the music industry look easy,” says Forrester analyst Sarah Rotman Epps. “It’s like dealing with the enterprise and the government market combined.”

Still, just as we had music MP3s long before the iTunes Store, the digital transformation of education is already underway. And even if Apple doesn’t end up

exerting nearly as much power over this market as they have in music, the blend of digital authoring tools, learning organization applications and multimedia books will likely still shape what will happen next.

"At Inkling, we have great technology, we have great publishing partners, and we make a terrific product," MacInnis told me. "But we can't shine the same spotlight on what we do or on what can be done that Apple can.

"What Apple's announcement does is move us into a world where all publishers have to think about creating books that are natively digital," he said, adding that everywhere Apple falls short, whether it's in the college market or pro-style authoring tools that give serious publishers more power than iBooks Author, Inkling and other software developers will fill in the gap.

Rotman Epps sees the same pattern: "iBooks Author helps democratize content production. It gives small developers the same tools as big publishers. Those developers can build upon and extend that platform with HTML5 and JavaScript, creating not just tools and widgets, but smaller companies that bigger publishers can acquire."

How does that digital future square with the entrenched culture of college and university campuses? It's always worth remembering that tablets and e-readers don't just aim to replace books, but entire bookstores. Nothing is immune from digital disruption, and the textbook industry is perhaps especially ripe for it. But it would still be a profound transformation for a 9.7? tablet and an Apple Store to replace the college bookstore and the university library as the twin foci of information on campus.

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