

Education

Anatomy of a varsity textbook

It's not just a lump of paper and ink, but a curated and researched stake in your future

COMMENT
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Daily we are confronted with the realities of the South African higher education situation and student funding. The start of the academic year was characterised by student protests at the Tshwane University of Technology and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The University of the Witwatersrand's student representative council also grabbed headlines with its bold initiative to raise funds for students in need. And amid the vigorous debates that spring up on talk radio stations, street corners and in coffee shops, that perennial question about the cost of textbooks rears its head.

Recently the minister of higher education and training, Blade Nzimande, made reference in the press to the high cost of textbooks and the effect on the cost of higher education. These statements follow hot on the heels of headlines such as "Students hurt by pricey textbooks" in this newspaper (October 3 2014). At the heart of these debates is a common desire to see students, regardless of background, having fair access to and succeeding at tertiary studies.

It is a good idea, then, to interrogate what goes into making a textbook. Much like any other product, a great deal of research and development precedes the actual printing of a book. We are fortunate in South Africa to have a thriving local publishing community. As a result of this, at any given time local publishers are investing a great deal in research to develop locally contextualised textbooks that combine

the best of international research and local content. It's a small industry and competition is friendly but fierce, which in turn drives quality research and quality products.

Typically when people think about the cost of making a book, they jump immediately to the cost of paper and ink, or printing and binding. In actual fact, this only contributes a small proportion to the cost of a textbook. The process begins with a publisher, who researches and specialises in a particular field, and an author team of highly experienced and dynamic academics. The development of a manuscript will usually include workshops and collaboration across multiple academic institutions for the author team, and a critical peer review process.

Instructional designers and learning specialists collaborate to develop additional support material for lecturers and students. At the heart of the production process, there are language editors, proofreaders, designers, typesetters, artists, illustrators and project managers, the majority of whom are highly skilled freelance professionals. Thus, a multitude of specialists collaborate to make a quality textbook.

Another unseen cost in book production is that of warehousing and distribution. From here, the textbook makes its way into the academic retail sector, which acts as an aggregator for publishers all over the globe. This sector enables the lecturer to prescribe almost any published book for his class, and the student to acquire her prescribed books easily. The retail sector is essential to the industry — opening a world of choice to South African academics, while carrying considerable risk.

In addition, our precious author



GRAPHIC: JOHN MCCANN

pool — South African academics, writers, practitioners and other professionals who enthusiastically share their expertise and passion for education, and generate the intellectual property captured in a textbook — also needs to be rewarded. They share in the success of their book, having made the investment of time and talent. These hidden costs rarely reflect in the price of a textbook.

But what about the e-book? Why do digital textbooks cost the same as their print counterparts? The majority of the ingredients needed to make a print textbook are also needed for the digital textbook. Research, development and editorial work depends on the same pool of experts. And with the production of such textbooks, a professional with very new and rare skills is required. There are different formats for digital textbooks, but the more sophisticated and flexible the format, the higher the development cost.

Textbooks are complex in layout, they are feature-rich and, as a result, the coding of the digital edition is considerably more complex than what lies behind the latest Jodi Picoult or John Grisham book.

And what about the saving on

print and distribution? Although it is true that there is no print cost associated with digital textbooks, there are still warehousing and distribution costs. In some instances, these may cost more than the warehousing and distribution of the physical book. Although there are one or two well-established distributors, the technologies are new and evolving, and many companies that host e-books are start-ups with huge investment costs to recoup. The Amazon model works for high volumes, much higher than we would ever see in textbook sales, and in South Africa the volume of digital sales is tiny at present.

Publishers carry substantial risk and if books do not sell they lie in a warehouse, where the financial investment wastes away on the shelves. Print runs for locally produced academic textbooks are not large, and it is hard to benefit from economies of scale. Margins are slim — neither author nor publisher makes exorbitant profit.

There are misconceptions about the cost of textbooks and, despite references in the media to prices upwards of R600 (as the *Mail & Guardian* article mentioned), textbook prices fall within a broad range.

There are a variety of reasons for this, including the fact that imported textbooks are subject to exchange rate fluctuations. The laws of supply and demand apply, and popular and undergraduate subject areas with larger potential markets will tend to have better priced textbooks — competition is greater, print runs are larger and economies of scale work to the benefit of all.

In disciplines such as accounting and law, textbooks date quickly; the publisher has a shorter period to recoup initial investments. Despite this, the average price for a local textbook at the beginning of the year was about R300 and, for an international academic retail sector, about R600.

When you buy a textbook, you are not only buying a bundle of ink and paper or a digital file. You buy curated and researched access to a specialised field; you buy access to an author's expertise in his or her field and experience in teaching. Isn't buying a stake in your future worth the price?

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