Apple's Textbooks: Undeniably Cool, But Will They Help Students?

By KAYLA WEBLEY | January 19, 2012 | 22

Apple debuted the holy grail of textbooks on Thursday in New York City. The books are undeniably cool: they will integrate videos, photos and interactive graphics, make taking notes a breeze and be easy to navigate — all features that will undoubtedly make Apple’s textbooks more enjoyable and engaging to students than the current dead tree versions. But the problem Apple ignored in their announcement is how to actually get their reinvented textbooks into the hands of students.

For the majority of schools, having cutting-edge technology in the classroom is still a far-flung dream. While ed-tech is a booming industry, if you’ve paid any amount of attention to education in the past few years, you’ll recall budgets have been slashed, teachers are losing their jobs and no amount of cookies sold at a bake sale will buy every kid an iPad.

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At the announcement Apple noted that there are currently 1.5 million iPads in use in educational institutions and schools today. That’s great, but they left out the fact that there are more than 49 million students enrolled in public schools in the U.S., so their penetration is still quite small. In fact, according to textbook distributor MBS Direct Digital, only 6% of textbook sales will be digital this year.

Part of that, of course, is because while textbook publishers have been producing electronic versions for years, they’ve lacked a strong technology platform to call home. Let’s pretend for a moment that a school district is somehow able to buy every student an iPad. One great thing about the textbooks is the cost: Apple says the books will be available for $14.99, a large discount from the average cost of the paper versions, which range from $75 to $100. With that low cost, it’s a wonder they have the big three textbook publishers — McGraw Hill, Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, who together make up 90% of the industry — on board. But, as Peter Kafka writes on All Things D, publishers expect to make up the difference in terms of volume.

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That’s because rather than schools buying the books for the students as is the model today, under Apple's arrangement with McGraw-Hill, the students will foot the bill for the books themselves. At the end of the year they’ll keep the books, but will not
be allowed to resell them or give them to another student. So when new students enroll the following year they will be required to purchase the book, too. This is vastly different from the practice today where school districts purchase books for a larger cost upfront, but hang onto them for five to 10 years, passing them from student to student.

But let’s get back to the fact that without a program to offer iPads at discounted rates to students, teachers and schools — which Apple conveniently left out of its announcement — in reality most students will still be using the same old textbooks for years to come. In the past few years since their debut, some school districts have indeed been able to buy iPads for all their students, but those districts are still in the vast minority. Thus in the most frightening scenario, one could imagine a world where Apple’s textbooks serve only to increase the digital divide, and thus the achievement gap. In this scenario, there will be some students who are able to use the new textbooks, likely those at wealthy suburban schools where either the school or their parents can afford to buy them an iPad, while other students, most likely those in impoverished urban schools, are stuck using paper textbooks that have been handed down for years.

That said, I consider Apple’s textbooks to be aspirational. Like many products Apple comes out with, they are well ahead of their time, and in this case, well ahead of the reality on the ground. If Apple’s textbook is the future, then the future of textbooks is a very exciting one—it’s just a question of how long it will take our schools to get there.

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