

Bespoke textbooks offer printers respite from the revenue-eliminating e-book model

 By [Vaughan Patterson](#)

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Publishers have made their bread and butter off textbooks for longer than students have endured on microwave noodles and crackers.

But the rise of diverse and modular curriculums in high schools, colleges, and universities has put the market under a cloud. Institutions and their faculty have increasingly switched from printed books to e-learning platforms so no longer can publishers rely on the lucrative spoils of students bombarded with dense texts.



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However, as the changes undermine the traditional market largesse they offer up an alternative income stream for publishers and printers. The flexibility of digital print enables printers to produce textbooks constructed of portions of one or several texts to combine syllabuses for hard copies unique to institutions.

One of the major snags to widespread adoption of this model, however, is an objection from the universities, the publishers, and authors of the texts: how will royalties be calculated and paid?

Until this question can be satisfactorily resolved the enormous benefits of this approach, particularly as far as professors

and students are concerned (ultimately the people these texts are supposed to serve), will be lost.

However, the model makes each produced book slightly more costly to buy, but results in far fewer books per student to offer overall savings. Unfortunately this isn't the case when texts are changed every year or when a new text is introduced and there aren't any second-hand versions available for typically thrifty students who maintain a thriving second hand book industry.

One publisher, though, figured out how to deal with the royalty issue in one niche. Pearson Education's imprint, Pearson Longman, sells course-specific law textbooks under its Longman Law Bespoke brand. In it the course tutor mixes standards sections from textbooks with their own specialist course notes for a bespoke approach. The books are produced on inkjet.

However, in another case, a US student laments in an online blog post how one professor allegedly instructed students to buy a combined text textbook from the university press for \$157, unavailable elsewhere and no second hand copies. The student later discovered it was a compilation of four older textbooks which the student then bought at discounted rates through Amazon for \$37, including shipping.

There are several reasons why that single text from the university press may have been so expensive. It could have included royalty payments in full to four different publishers plus production and retail costs with mark ups. It could also have been a little bit of an unscrupulous marketing ploy designed to extract maximum profits from students. Whatever the cause, it's an example of how not to go about publishing bespoke texts for students.

It also highlights a crucial opportunity. Students are always looking for ways to cut the cost of textbooks while professors want to bolster the narratives at their disposal to impart knowledge. Whichever universities, publishers, printers, and authors figure out how to hurdle the royalty challenges will overcome the limitations of the past and release the potential of the future.

ABOUT VAUGHAN PATTERSON

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