

Textbook Case and Mentoring as Education, Not Training

March 21, 2005

The Academic Observer hit a nerve with his January column “Why Are Textbooks So Expensive?” Following are just some of the comments received. See his response to these letters [here](#).

I VERY MUCH ENJOYED RODDY Roediger’s provocative commentary on the consequences of the sale of used textbooks. Recognizing that used-book sales are almost certainly not going to disappear, any more than sales of used cars, used DVDs, or used musical instruments are going to disappear, one possible solution would be publishers of textbooks themselves entering the used-book market, in the same way that many car dealers sell both new and used cars, many musical-instrument dealers sell both new and used instruments, and many DVD dealers sell both new and used DVDs. The publishers would then be able to earn additional profits from this market and perhaps would not need to charge as much for new textbooks as they have in the past.

This solution probably would not help authors of textbooks (including myself) a whole lot. But in the end, as the competition increases in the used-book market, it is likely to reduce the cost of those books, and thus benefit students.

—**Robert J. Sternberg**
Yale University

ROEDIGER HINTS THAT ONE solution to the textbook problem would be to make the organized re-selling of used textbooks illegal. The sizeable and lucrative market in used books profits neither authors nor publishers, driving publishers to jack up prices of new books to make their money on the first sale.

I appreciate the problem of high textbook prices, but this sounds like a poor solution. First, a book is the buyer’s property; buyers should ideally be able to do what they want with it (as long as it is not brought down on somebody else’s head). Second, what counts as organized reselling? Is Roediger opposed to people selling their textbooks to their friends? What about a student-run book swap? The buyer and seller are presumably happy about the used book market — it saves them the trouble of finding individuals who have the book they want.

The used book company that Roediger calls a parasite on the system is just a facilitator, and one that gets paid for the facilitation only if buyers and sellers value the convenience offered by the company.

As two cognitive psychologists, I’ll bet that Roediger and I agree that the informational content in a book is more important than the actual physical product. However, this consideration leads me to a very different kind of modest proposal for assuring that authors are properly compensated.

For materials where intellectual content is primary, I would like to see them paid for out of a fund to

which all interested parties would contribute a yearly lump sum. The fund would be governmentally regulated, and payments to authors would be roughly proportional to the number of accesses to the information, modified as policy-makers see fit to promote work from young or under-represented researchers, or work that is viewed as particularly important for society. By tying profits to accesses (e.g. downloads), authors would be rewarded for writing material that has enduring impact, which is just what the author is trying to do anyway.

—**Robert Goldstone**

Indiana University

ON BEHALF OF THE THOUSANDS of college stores and their professional staff, I am very disappointed that Roediger would overlook so many of the contributing factors of textbook pricing and present an overly simplified and distorted perspective of the textbook market. At the very least, his column should have referenced factual information.

His assertion that college stores prefer selling used books because of their profit margins, or that the high cost of textbooks is the direct result of the used book market, is fundamentally flawed. College stores sell used books because students demand them, and have created the market for them. The buying and selling of used books has become more sophisticated over the years, but the premise of students wanting lower cost course materials has not changed since Roediger participated in the practice of buying a used book from a fellow student in the late 1960s. Furthermore, used books fill a niche of the overall textbook market — in 2003, used book sales accounted for only 27 percent of all course materials sales. While this market share may grow slightly each year, the finite availability of used books keeps the market stable and predictable. As a result, the market share for new textbooks continues to represent the largest portion of all course materials sales.

At the heart of this textbook pricing issue is the question of value that students perceive textbooks to have relative to their overall educational experience. The fact that Roediger has observed and bemoaned the declining practice of students building personal libraries is evidence itself of the decline in perceived value. Faculty make conscientious choices about the textbooks that should be used in each course that will best help the student understand and comprehend the topics of instruction. College store professionals work tirelessly to ensure faculty choices of textbooks are available to students. Publishers produce their textbooks with a variety of learning tools and engage faculty members to author, contribute, and review textbook content. Each of these processes constitutes or influences the business practices that ensure the academic endeavors of both faculty and student are fully supported.

As president of the National Association of College Stores, I am proud to represent the thousands of individuals who work each day to influence the business practices that will give students affordable access to course materials. I know that by working collaboratively with faculty, publishers, used book companies, and others who share in the mission of supporting higher education, we will be able to find the appropriate solutions that provide students with the value and quality of education they deserve.

—**Peggy Falgien**

President

National Association of College Stores

I READ WITH AMUSEMENT Henry L. Roediger's article regarding textbook prices and the argument that used books and the villainous bookstores are the reason for high costs. I see he consulted with a publisher representative to gain information from the publishing side of the industry. I do not see where he met with bookstore professionals or students to gain the other side of the argument.

Textbook prices are high; that is a fact of life. The cost for production and development are passed on to bookstores that then have to mark books up to recoup their own costs, including payroll, rent, bad debts, and freight. Traditionally, tuition and state dollars do not fund bookstores, but bookstores are expected to return revenue to the campuses they serve. Students want used books — if the bookstores don't provide them, students buy them elsewhere. Even Amazon.com sells used books.

The article failed to address the issue of overseas books. Publishers sell textbooks overseas for significantly less money than they sell the same book to bookstores in the United States. Perhaps Roediger could discuss this unfair business practice with his publisher contact.

Roediger drew conclusions without having a complete picture of the issue. I might ask him: Would you accept such flawed research from one of your students?

—**Catherine R. Scott**

Director of College Stores

Community Colleges of Spokane

I ENCOURAGE ROEDIGER TO DO some further research on the issue of textbook pricing, used book companies, and college and university bookstores. The retail industry works on margin, not markup. A book bought for \$73.50 and sold for \$99.75 has a 26 percent margin, which might seem high, but most retailers are much higher (40 to 50 percent and more). The average margin on textbooks in college stores is between 22 and 23 percent.

Many college stores pay 50 percent of the new book price at buyback when the book is reused on campus. Some pay as much as 60 percent. These books are then sold to students at 75 percent of the new book price. So, a book that costs \$75 from the publisher is sold for \$100 to the student, and the bookstore makes gross profit of \$25. When the student sells the book back to the bookstore, he or she receives \$50 and the bookstore sells it for \$75. The bookstore makes the same \$25 gross profit. We prefer to sell the used books because they cost the student less, not because we make more money. It is true to say our margin is higher on a used book than a new book, but not our revenue.

To oversimplify what college bookstores do and say we just "let [books] sit on their shelves for a couple of weeks" and that "it's a no-risk business" is like saying "all instructors don't like new editions because they then have to do some actual work and recreate their syllabus." Talk with your bookstore director and have him or her walk you through the process. I think you will be surprised by what you see.

—**John Parry**

Director

Colorado State University Bookstore

I DON'T DISAGREE THAT THE sale of used books by college bookstores, students, and online retailers is one aspect of the problem of rising costs on textbooks. But the problem begins and ends with faculty who adopt a textbook for their course and never use it in the class. Too often a book is only required for a course to satisfy accreditation guidelines for a particular department, school, or college. As soon as a student determines that an expensive book won't be used in a course, it is quickly returned to the point of purchase. It doesn't matter whether the student purchased a new or used copy of that book; if it's not seriously required in the course by the professor, the student will not (and should not) spend the money for the book.

Some publisher return policies can be very restrictive — some, in fact, do not even allow returns of unsold books. And in some cases we get a credit memo that cannot be spent again, because we don't order any more books from the press, and the publisher won't allow a cash refund.

I do share Roediger's concern that faculty authors lose access to their royalties from the sale of used books (although I'm not sure that "cheated" is the right word). I could make a case for royalties being paid to the school that employs the faculty-author rather than to the individual, and then he wouldn't feel "cheated." On the other hand, he probably wouldn't be making comments about the author and the publisher "getting rich" either. I don't think many faculty-authors are getting rich from their textbook contracts. In fact, they probably are getting a credit in their "tenure book" for the publication.

—**Tommye H. Miller**

General Manager

Valdosta State University Bookstore

THE ACADEMIC OBSERVER MAY need new glasses. Henry Roediger warps so many facts in his quest to cast blame that he completely misses the real source of high prices.

Publishers keep the bulk of the first sale dollars. In his example, Roediger states that \$11.02 in royalties was paid to him and his partner authors, and \$26.25 went to the bookstore. That bookstore portion represents a 26.3 percent markup. The bookstore paid freight (about \$4.50), personnel (about \$16), and other operating costs (\$5.75) from their share. Few bookstores make any profit on their new textbooks.

Roediger really should have looked up the definition of markup and then applied it in the same manner expected of practitioners in his own field. He compares 20 percent markup of 30 years ago to 37.5 percent today. This is a false comparison. If we accept 20 percent as the markup from 30 years ago, we need to state today's markup as 26.3 percent. If we want to state today's markup as 37.5 percent we need to state the markup 30 years ago as 25 percent. Thirty years ago, most publishers sold textbooks to college stores at a list price less 20 percent discount. In retail terms, that is known as a 20 percent markup. Few stores could cover their costs with that slim markup. This is the financial situation that gave true impetus to the used book market as we see it today.

Faculty and publishers control the textbook market. Successful authors may have even more control over publishers pricing policies than they think. However, only by taking the time to do the research required to gain knowledge, can anything constructive ever take place.

—**Don Newton**

*Immediate Past President
California Association of College Stores*

AS THE STORE DIRECTOR AT Hope College, I consider myself a member of our educational community: The primary objective for my staff and me is to put learning resources in the hands of our students.

I strongly disagree with Roediger's analogy of used book sales to pirating DVDs. I think the real problem is that (unlike cars, or bicycles, or clothes) a book's content is not "consumed" in any meaningful way, so a difference in value between new and used texts is not perceived by the customer.

As the dollar spread between new and used books becomes greater, students will continue to demand used (cheaper) books. One rational way to combat this increased demand might be for new book prices to be included in tuition and for books to be given to students for free. That would certainly encourage library building while at the same time undercutting the used book market. Perhaps authors and publishers should try to promote it.

So why *are* textbooks so expensive? After all these years, I tell students and faculty it is a complicated mix of rarified knowledge, limited print runs, corporate profit goals, used book sales, and the desire for all of us (authors, publishers, and bookstore people) to make a living. The last time I saw numbers, textbooks had not increased faster than the pace of tuition, which is I think a more valid comparison.

—**Mark J. Cook**
*Director
Hope-Geneva Bookstore*

I WANTED TO COMMEND Roediger's honesty and thoroughness in his article "Why Are Textbooks So Expensive?" As a representative of a publishing company, I deal daily with the issues discussed. I am frequently shocked that professors don't understand the perils of used books and tell me they only want to adopt a book if used copies are available. I share with them many of the points that Roediger mentioned.

—**Julie Brininger Wolfe**
*Senior Publisher's Representative
McGraw-Hill Higher Education*

THANKS FOR THE TERRIFIC article about textbooks in the *Observer*. My guess is that someday the used-textbook situation will change, with the electronic distribution of textbooks.

I think many of Roediger's ideas are part of a more general dilemma of increasing disregard for compensation for intellectual property. More audiences (students, reporters, Internet surfers, and even university administrators) want freely available scholarly information while legislators increasingly cut back on the support of public universities. University deans with squeezed budgets expect more effort (larger classes) and more entrepreneurship (extramural funding) from their faculty but paradoxically discourage commercial enterprises. Roediger notes that bookstores, not publishers or authors, make the vast bulk of the profits from textbooks, but universities would not of course let their professors own and

run the university bookstore. Short of grinding lenses like Spinoza or becoming a patent clerk in Switzerland, where will future faculty secure the essential support for their scholarship? Further, many of our best students now head for well-funded fields such as biotechnology, medicine, law, or plain old capitalism (business), thus eroding our intellectual capital as well.

—**Howard S. Friedman**

University of California, Riverside

Mentoring as Education, Not Training

THE PRESIDENTIAL COLUMN, “Mentoring: Reflections on Becoming an Academic Great-Grandparent,” [Observer, December 2004] inspires some recollections about my mentor, the late Dick Champion, who supervised my BA, MA, and PhD research at the University of Sydney.

Dick’s mentoring involved education rather than “training.” He viewed the relationship between mentor and mentee as an academic/intellectual one, rather than one resembling that between a parent and a child, or a therapist and a patient. He and I continually disagreed on certain fundamental topics (e.g., whether what is learned is only Hullian S-R associations, as he insisted, or whether Tolmanian cognitive, propositional knowledge is also learned). In other words, I was his student, not his disciple, and our ongoing intellectual conflicts only deepened our friendship after I graduated.

Moreover, the mentoring style I experienced was similar to many of Dick’s other students. A relatively objective appraisal of this style was provided by Ian Curthoys who, at the time of Dick’s death, was head of the psychology department at Sydney. While not a student of Dick’s, Ian had been both a student and a faculty member at Sydney since the early 1960s. He pointed out that Dick “sought to give his students the *independence* [emphasis added] and confidence in their own intellectual ability, which is so vital in all walks of life but is an absolute necessity in academic life.” *

Such a mentoring style is weakened by the disciple-based system, in which education is referred to as “training” and, for all practical purposes, the student’s funding and completion of the doctorate are dependent on the supervisor’s opinions. Also lost is experience with the conflict of ideas that comprise an important aspect of education in any genuinely scientific discipline.

—**John Furedy**

University of Toronto

* From *Integrative Physiology and Behavioral Science*, 25. (2002).