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The Future of Textbooks?

Ryan T. Cragun

cragunrt@email.uc.edu

University of Cincinnati

Department of Sociology

Abstract

Textbooks play a significant role in the education of millions of students every year. This article discusses a budding technology that could revolutionize the development of textbooks through the use of “wikis” or collaborative websites. The article discusses the pros and cons of such an approach and describes the author's effort to develop a free, online, introductory sociology textbook. Also discussed are responses from a course evaluation in which this text was used.

Introduction

I believe my favorite description of textbooks was that of a colleague who described them as 'a necessary evil.' Why a necessary evil? Textbooks boil down subject matter to its simplest form, facilitating digestion, but foregoing complexity. They also tend to favor breadth – covering as much content as possible – at the expense of depth. This is especially the case in introductory classes where students are approaching a discipline with no background knowledge on the topic. Textbooks are also costly and difficult to resell at a reasonable price. There are also numerous theoretical perspectives in sociology and it is rare to find two sociologists who agree on everything. Textbooks, while striving for neutrality in their perspectives,

inevitably present the perspectives of their respective authors. All of these characteristics – oversimplification, cost, and conflicting perspectives – contribute to their 'evil' nature.

But if the use of textbooks is a necessary evil, is there anything that can be done to reduce this evil? One alternative, embraced by some professors, is to not use textbooks at all. While it is possible to teach introductory courses without using textbooks, it is rarely done because textbooks provide pre-packaged format (some even include lecture outlines), saving instructors time and resources. This approach is likely the best way to address the issue of oversimplification, especially if professors use original source materials (i.e., peer-reviewed articles). But it also raises the concern of understanding. Most peer-reviewed articles require substantial background knowledge to be understood. There is also the issue of providing the source materials to the students, which for years resulted in the photocopying of course packets. Depending on the size of the packet and whether or not the copying institution was forced to pay royalties, these could range in price from relatively inexpensive¹ to almost the cost of a new edition textbook.² Thus, while using source materials solves the concern of oversimplification, it is deficient in background material, which is necessary for comprehension, and it often does not resolve the issue of cost because packets can be almost as expensive as textbooks.

This article describes a new alternative to address the problems of course textbooks: A free, interactive, collaborative textbook website. The possibility for a collaboratively developed textbook has only existed for a short time, since the advent of “wikis” (websites that allow visitors to modify the content of the pages they are viewing). The most successful wiki on the internet today is Wikipedia,³ a collaborative encyclopedia that allows readers to contribute by modifying the content of articles and creating new articles. The Wikimedia Foundation⁴ has developed several 'sister' sites that have a similar framework – they employ wiki software – but with different goals. Wikiquote⁵ is a collaborative project for collecting quotes. Wiktionary⁶ is a collaborative dictionary. And then there is Wikibooks,⁷ the website of interest in this article. The goal of Wikibooks is to develop and disseminate free, open content textbooks and manuals. And, following the design of the other wiki sites, the textbooks are developed using wiki software, allowing for the most extensive form of collaboration possible: every reader of the text is also a potential contributor.

This article describes my experience developing an introductory sociology textbook using Wikibooks⁸. It outlines my motivations and hesitations in developing the textbook and concludes with a brief discussion of student responses to the

textbook provided in the course evaluations.

What is a “wiki” and why Wikibooks?

I should probably begin by explaining what a “wiki” is. A wiki can refer to one of two things. First, it refers to the software that allows users to add and edit content on websites. There are several important components to such software. Wiki software allows users to create both new content and new pages. It also tracks all of the changes made to a webpage. This is an invaluable feature for a number of reasons, but perhaps most importantly because it allows users to revert pages back to previous versions when the inevitable wiki-vandal defaces a page. Wiki-vandalism refers to people who modify the content of the page to reflect something other than the original intention of the page.⁹ For those concerned about either vandalism or the addition of bad information to a wiki, wiki software has addressed that concern by providing a page reversion feature that allows a page to be returned to its state before it was vandalized.

The second thing “wiki” can refer to is the collective content of a website that is developed using wiki software. Thus, Wikipedia and Wikibooks are referred to as a “wikis”. Wikis are often also used to collaboratively develop guides for software, like the mozilla wiki¹⁰ that provides user information for software developed by the Mozilla Foundation.¹¹

It is important to understand here that “wikis” are more than just a method of content development or the end result. They also represent a fundamental shift in the concept of authority, especially as it relates to the development of reference material (e.g., dictionaries, encyclopedias, and even textbooks). Rather than rely solely on faceless and often nameless “experts” for authoritative information, wikis rely on communal knowledge. Wikis recognize the ability of a community to improve content through collective knowledge and collaboration. The idea is shockingly simple but also revolutionary.

The wiki philosophy recognizes that within the broader community there is a wealth of knowledge. Of course, some of that knowledge is accurate and some is inaccurate. Rather than appeal to authorities directly (e.g., the peer-review process), wikis extend an open invitation to everyone with the assumption that authorities on given topics will eventually show up and contribute what they know about the topic. Thus, the success of a wiki is highly dependent upon drawing numerous contributors. The more contributors, the broader the range of expertise, and the better the final product. The success of projects like Wikipedia depend

heavily upon the increasing penetration of the World Wide Web into the everyday lives of people around the world. In proposing the continued development of sociology textbooks, I am making an appeal to the communal knowledge base. The more people who use the texts, the more potential contributors, and the better the final products.

I should also note that I decided to use Wikibooks specifically as the home of my foray into collaborative content development for several reasons. First, it is run by the same foundation that runs Wikipedia, one of the most successful wikis to date. This means the resources that go into the continued development of Wikipedia will also facilitate the development and maintenance of Wikibooks. It also allows for the cross-collaboration between Wikibooks and Wikipedia. Readers who visit the sociology textbook I have developed on Wikibooks will quickly note the numerous links to Wikipedia, where topics are expounded at greater length in encyclopedic articles. Finally, there is a rather idealistic reason I decided to use Wikibooks instead of another wiki resource, I agree with their philosophy, "Imagine a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing. And we need your help."¹²

Why create a free, open source sociology textbook?

There are two primary reasons why I decided to undertake this project. I will discuss each in turn, starting with the most important for me: the cost of textbooks.

I began this project as a graduate student and, as such, I was quite aware of the cost of textbooks. Prices for textbooks seem to be increasing. While it is not entirely clear why this is the case, it is probably a combination of factors. Roediger (2005) argues that rising prices of new textbooks are attributable to the prevalence of used textbooks in the marketplace. Used textbooks cut into the profit margins of the major publishing companies because, after the initial sale of the book, publishing companies (and the authors of the books) no longer receive compensation for the work they create. In response, according to Roediger, publishing companies have raised the price of new books to recoup their investment. Roediger claims the real winners in the textbook industry are not the publishing companies (a point I will address below), but the companies that trade in used books because they have such high profit margins from the repeated sales of the same books.

Included among the peddlers of used books are campus bookstores, which are often not owned by the universities they service anymore. Roediger (2005) claims campus bookstores mark up the cost of new textbooks anywhere from 20% to 40%. The mark up on used books is even higher as the bookstore likely paid the student who previously used the book less than 40% of the original value of the book. The bookstore is then able to mark up the used book by close to 50% and still attract buyers because the price is lower than the new books.

While it is uncertain that new editions are a response to the glut of used copies in the marketplace and declining profitability, as Roediger (2005) suggests, it is certain that issuing new editions of textbooks is designed to improve profitability. By introducing a new edition of a textbook into the market, used copies of old editions are no longer viable competitors. This increases the profits of the publishing company. But this profitability only lasts as long as there is a shortage of used copies of the new edition. Once the new edition has been on the market long enough, competition from used copies begins.

Publishing companies have now taken the release of new editions of textbooks to a new level. Some textbooks are re-issued every other year, even though the information they contain remains virtually unchanged. Take Macionis's *Sociology* for example. I harbor no ill-will toward this book; it's a good book. In fact, it is the book I replaced by creating my own textbook this year. But it is illustrative of the trend among publishing companies to release new editions as often as possible. The editions are listed below with their dates of publication:

Table 1. Years of publication of John J. Macionis's Sociology.

Edition	Year of Publication	ISBN
1 st	1987	0138233454
2 nd	1989	0138232873
3 rd	1991	0138204241
4 th	1993	0138184852
5 th	1995	0131011553
6 th	1997	0132372649
7 th	1999	0130953911
8 th	2001	0130184950
9 th	2003	0130977632
10 th	2005	0131849182

I should note here that one of my hesitations in creating this textbook was that by so doing I might undermine publication opportunities in the social sciences. Given the somewhat peripheral position of the social sciences in academia as it is, I did not want to be accused of contributing to that marginalization. I obviously overcame that hesitation, but I did so by realizing that freeing up professors from having their students purchase costly textbooks will actually allow them to assign other books in their classes. Assigning books like Glassner's *Culture of Fear* (1999) as an accompaniment to a free course textbook addresses the earlier issue I raised of balancing breadth and depth. The textbook, which is free, covers the spectrum of sociological investigation. The topical sociological text, which can be bought on

Amazon.com for under ten dollars, provides additional depth and illustrates how sociological investigation can contribute to a better understanding of society.

I was also initially concerned that the free textbook might result in sociology professors losing a significant source of income. For some sociologists who publish textbooks, their textbooks may, in fact, be a significant source of their income. According to Roediger (2005), authors of textbooks receive anywhere from 10% to 15% of the proceeds of each book sale. If your textbook is widely adopted – thanks to the pervasive marketing techniques of textbook publishers – that could translate into a significant income. But, once again, the real winners when it comes to publication are not the professors (with some exceptions). The real winners are the publishing companies and the used book re-sellers.

As Roediger (2005) points out, most textbooks are now published by mega-corporations that have bought up smaller competitors. One of the biggest is Pearson (NYSE symbol PSON), a British corporation that owns a number of smaller publishing companies, including Prentice Hall, Penguin, and Pearson Education. While Roediger's claims that book re-sellers are the ones making the profit, Pearson's financial statements indicate the company is not suffering. Pearson did close to £3.7 billion in sales in 2004. Their profit from those sales was in the hundreds of millions of pounds (Pearson 2005). Pearson may be losing money to used book re-sellers, but they are also profiting from students who are basically forced to purchase textbooks.

I have read some remarkable textbooks and I am hesitant to propose a new approach that could lead to authors losing money on their investments. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the benefits of open-source textbooks by far outweigh the costs. If I have it within my power to reduce the cost of education for my students, I will do what I can to achieve that aim.

My Self-Serving Interests

In the previous section I painted myself in a somewhat altruistic light; as though I was only interested in helping students save money. Well, there is a bit more to it. I obviously have ulterior motives in developing a free textbook. The biggest - and most self-serving - is that I can add this to my vitae. But, as it was quickly pointed out by a mentor of mine, the development of an open-source textbook derived in part from pre-existing sources (i.e., articles in Wikipedia) does not technically qualify as a publication. Thus, this effort is listed on my vitae only as a 'novel teaching initiative'.

I could have created my own book without putting it online and making it available to other professors for use in their own classes. But doing so would undermine the wiki model of collaborative development. Pardon my idealism, but I feel obliged to admit I have a rather lofty vision of collaboratively developed textbooks – wikibooks – becoming not only the most widely used but the most comprehensive and well-written textbooks. This idealism stems from the quite plausible potential of the model.

As I noted earlier, the philosophy that drives wikis includes the notion that the more exposure a webpage (or, in this case, a book) gets, the more likely it is to improve. In the case of a sociology textbook, this is particularly true. My area of interest in sociology is the sociology of religion. If you visit the introductory sociology textbook I created, you will notice that the chapter on religion is one of the most developed. This is obviously a result of my personal interest and familiarity with the literature on religion. I am far less familiar with race and ethnicity. That chapter could benefit greatly from the contributions of sociologists who specialize in that area. If a sociologist whose focus is race (and/or ethnicity) were to adopt the textbook for an introductory course, it is likely they would revise the chapter on race and ethnicity, improving the content in the process. Theoretically, if enough sociologists with differing interests adopt the textbook for their courses and contribute to the textbook's development, the textbook could eventually become one of the most well-developed textbooks available for instructors to use.

The wide adoption of this textbook by sociology instructors would have another significant benefit to all users of the textbook: it would one-up publishing companies who release new editions every couple of years by being constantly updated. The textbook would be in a constant state of change as the knowledge of the discipline is changing. Once again, this is idealistic, but certainly not without precedent, as witnessed by the remarkable adaptability and currency of Wikipedia. One clear example of this is the development of an article on the London bombing on July 7th of 2005. By 9:18 AM the day of the incident an article had already been started on Wikipedia.¹³ Within days, the article length was extensive and the contributions continue.¹⁴ Contributions to wikis can happen as near to “real-time” as possible.

How, then, is providing an up-to-date and comprehensive sociology textbook self-serving? I could claim a small degree of credit for having started the project, which brings us full circle to the contribution on my vitae. If, as my idealism suggests, wiki-based textbooks catch on, I would be riding the wave of development as a leading contributor. That is how the development of a free textbook is self-serving.

History

So, how did this come about? I initially heard about Wikipedia in late 2003 in a discussion with a friend. This coincided with my preparations for teaching an introductory sociology course.¹⁵ It was the second time I would be teaching the course and, with a little experience under my belt, I was beginning to see how the textbook game worked. What cued me in to this was that the first year I taught the course (2003) I had been contacted by Prentice Hall about the publication of the Ninth Edition of Macionis's *Sociology* text. In preparing my course in 2004, I caught wind that a new edition was in the works, again thanks to the marketing department at Prentice Hall. As a second-time instructor, I actually found this disturbing because I thought it would mean I would have to update my teaching presentations to more closely follow the text in the new edition. As a result, I held off preparing my course until I received an advance copy of the tenth edition. Of course, I quickly realized that almost nothing had changed, which actually saved me having to update my lecture notes.

It was during the preparation to teach the class in 2004 that I began more intently exploring Wikipedia. I browsed through a few topics of interest, including the articles on sociology¹⁶ and deviance.¹⁷ As I explored a bit further, the thought dawned on me that Wikipedia contained about 20% to 40% of the content necessary to create an introductory sociology textbook. I also happened to find Wikipedia's sister site around this same time, Wikibooks, and realized that almost no development had been done on sociology texts. As extra credit for my course in 2004 I encouraged students to contribute to either Wikipedia or Wikibooks. Not one student took me up on the offer.

The lack of initiative on the part of the students – which most instructors will likely not find surprising – led me to realize that if a textbook was going to be developed, I would have to take the initiative. Textbook adoptions for the summer of 2005 teaching session were due at the beginning of April. It was at that point I decided I would simply write my own textbook and have it ready by mid-June when my course began. Little did I realize I had just committed to a marathon writing season. With the help of an unexpected but serendipitous contributor, the chapters I decided to teach were all completed – to varying degrees of satisfaction – before the students were required to read them. The book presently contains fifteen completed chapters, covering most of the fundamental concepts of sociology and a few of the areas of interest (e.g., religion, race and ethnicity, and medicine and healthcare). While I cannot provide an exact breakdown of how much of the content was borrowed from Wikipedia, I would estimate that somewhere between

30% and 50% was, depending on the chapter. I also outlined a number of additional textbooks and chapters for the introductory textbook which can be found in the Sociology Department of Wikiversity.¹⁸ In talking about my project with some colleagues, one decided to adopt the textbook for his course this summer. Lucky for him, his course started a week after mine ended, so he had the benefit of working with a fairly complete text and the benefit of my PowerPoint presentations, which I linked to from the book's home page.

Results

I was initially concerned that the students in my course (N=7) would be hesitant to use a textbook that was still under development *and* being developed by a graduate student. But I did not hear a single complaint about the textbook. In fact, I received far more complaints about the companion text – Glassner's *Culture of Fear* (1999) – not being available in local bookstores than I did about the course textbook.

Because of this 'novel teaching initiative', I decided I would include an extension to the standard course evaluation to find out how well the textbook was really received. Because I did not apply for IRB approval to use the course evaluation results in this article, I have not aggregated the data and will only paraphrase what the students said about the textbook.

The evaluation included ten questions about the Wikibook. The first four asked the students to rate the book on a five point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' on the following:

1. *The textbook clearly presented the information it covered.*
2. *The textbook had a logical structure.*
3. *The textbook covered everything I had hoped it would.*
4. *The length of the chapters was satisfactory.*

The lowest rated of these four was number three, which received several neutral ratings. Other than these neutral ratings, all of the other ratings were on the 'agree' side of the scale.

I also asked the students what they liked the most and the least about the textbook. Clearly, the favored attribute was the book's cost – it's free! Several students noted that they do not like spending money on texts they will never use

again. While I might take affront to the fact they do not plan on using my text in the future, I am instead choosing to focus on the positive component of that assessment. A number of students also noted that having the text online made it easily accessible. Ironically, this was also the biggest criticism of the book – that you had to have internet access to read it.

The last three questions had almost universal consensus. I asked the students what could be done to improve the text. Among those who responded, they all said “finish the chapters that were not complete.” I asked a somewhat complicated question of the students, but they seemed to understand what was being asked, “*Would you prefer a more developed textbook that costs money over the free textbook that was used for the course? Why or why not?*” The consensus was clear – they all favored the free textbook, in large part because it was free. Finally, I asked how the textbook compared to other textbooks they had used. One student said the book was about the same as other textbooks they had used. All of the other students said it was better than other textbooks they had used.

It was nice to have my efforts positively appraised by my students. But I think the clear selling point of the book is the fact that it is free (pun intended). That one characteristic outweighs the fact that it is not complete and certain chapters still need a significant amount of work. Having spent the last seven years of my life as a student, I can attest to the attractiveness of stuff that is free. But free does not always mean good. The text is clearly in need of additional contributors and extensive revisions. That the book is not well-developed with a variety of topical chapters that can be taught is my biggest concern about the book at present. By including more content instructors will have more options for chapters they want to teach. And by further developing the existing content, students will have a better learning experience. Even so, I believe it lays the groundwork for future development.

Is there a future in collaborative textbooks?

In conclusion, I ask the readers of this journal an important question: Is there a future in free, collaborative textbooks? In this short article I have attempted to present both the positives and negatives of such an initiative as well as recount my own experience developing such a resource. My students clearly liked the text, despite its flaws, but this was likely due – in large part - to the text being free.

If you do have comments or responses, feel free to contact me through this article or through the Wikibooks website. Better yet, adopt the text for your next introductory course and begin improving it.

References

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- Roediger, Henry L. I. 2005. "Why Are Textbooks So Expensive." *The Academic Observer* 18(1).

Endnotes

1. I have paid as little as \$15.00 for a course packet and as much as \$65.00.
2. An increasingly popular alternative to physical copies of course packets is to post articles or scanned book chapters online (using Blackboard or some other course management software), allowing the students to download and print the materials themselves. While this can reduce costs, especially for students who do not print copies, it generally results in the cost being passed on to the student through personal printing costs or to the university if the articles are printed using university facilities.
3. [Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)H
4. <http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home>
5. [Hhttp://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Main_Page)H
6. [Hhttp://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Main_Page)H
7. [Hhttp://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Main_Page)H
8. The text is available here:
[Hhttp://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Introduction_to_Sociology](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Introduction_to_Sociology)H . See also:
[Hhttp://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wikiversity:School_of_Sociology](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wikiversity:School_of_Sociology)H

9. An example of wiki-vandalism can be seen here:
[Hhttp://en.wikibooks.org/w/index.php?title=Main_Page&oldid=118379](http://en.wikibooks.org/w/index.php?title=Main_Page&oldid=118379)H.

10. [Hhttp://wiki.mozilla.org/Main_Page](http://wiki.mozilla.org/Main_Page)H

11. [Hhttp://www.mozilla.org/](http://www.mozilla.org/)H

12. This quote is found on top of the home page of the Wikimedia Foundation:
[Hhttp://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home](http://wikimediafoundation.org/wiki/Home)H.

13. [Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=7_July_2005_London_bombings&oldid=18317302](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=7_July_2005_London_bombings&oldid=18317302)H

14. [Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_July_2005_London_bombings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_July_2005_London_bombings)H

15. As a graduate student, I only taught one course per year during the summer.

16. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology>

17. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deviant_behavior

18. [Hhttp://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wikiversity:School_of_Sociology](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Wikiversity:School_of_Sociology)H

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