Bill Marsh
. . . .

Bill Marsh holds a Ph.D in Communication from UC San Diego. His book on plagiarism, *Plagiarism: Alchemy and Remedy in Higher Education,* was released this past March from SUNY Press. In the Fall of 2007, Bill moves from St. John's University to Queensborough Community College, where he will teach beginning and advanced writing.

Rethinking Textbook Production in Composition

Bill Marsh

In the United States, educational entrepreneurship has always gone hand in hand with educational reform. Today we may lament the new efficiencies of the corporate university – productivity and performance guidelines, commercialization of faculty work, casualization of academic labor – but the truth is business incursions and scientific management protocols in higher education are nothing new.

And yet, while corporate interests have always had some influence on the direction and scope of higher education, they now seem to be the driving force behind a new institutional pragmatism whose chief traits include an eager acceptance of "market logic," increased interest in a "vocational and technical model of education,"[1] and ever closer ties between educational institutions and private enterprises committed less to liberation through education than to their own "freedom of movement" in a shrinking global market.[2]

The textbook industry, for example, has done quite well in recent years by capitalizing on higher education, and this despite student complaints about rising costs and some legislative scrambling on their behalf. As it stands, college students can expect to spend on average about $900 annually on books alone.[3] Industry apologists defend this figure by pointing to the high costs of textbook production, particularly for books that come bundled with added instructional and technological features, such as workbooks, CD-ROMs, and online grading instruments. Professors and students counter that most of these features, as well as the marginally "new" content of new editions, are unnecessary and rarely justified. According to a 2004 California Public Interest Research Group (CALPIRG) report, more than two-thirds of surveyed faculty almost never use the bundled materials that come with textbooks

1. Marc Bousquet, *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers.* 13.

2. Richard Ohmann, "Citizenship and Lit-eracy Work: Thoughts Without a Conclusion" In Bousquet, 43.

3. John H. Pollitz and Anne Christie. "The High Cost of Textbooks: A Convergence of Academic Libraries, Campus Bookstores, Publishers?"

and have little or no need for new editions of a selected text.[4] Meanwhile, students don't often have the option to buy books without these costly add-ons, and efforts to sell used books on the secondary market are compromised by the "clockwork" production pace of textbook publishers, who force older editions off the shelves by pumping out pricier editions every year.[5] Custom publishing options turn out to be similarly prohibitive due to the higher costs of customization and students' inability, as with traditional textbooks, to sell their custom textbooks on the secondary market.

Despite these concerns, many continue to support the textbook racket in higher ed in part due to the prevailing wisdom that textbooks offer a convenient way to do three important things: share disciplinary knowledge, earn points toward tenure and promotion, and help students gain entry to a given subject matter. To be sure, the degree to which textbooks benefit students depends on the curriculum in play, the discipline, the institutional environment, and the learning tasks at hand. Composition theorist Kurt Spellmeyer decried textbooks as "pedestrian materials" designed to "remove knowledge" (e.g., from "the lab, the library, the household") and transport it, "dead and sealed in wax," to the classroom.[6] It remains to be seen, however, whether that kind of textual conveyance is helpful to those on the receiving end, such as teachers and students seeking direct access to disciplinary knowledge.

In any event, whether or not textbooks (handbooks, workbooks, and guidebooks, as well) are pedagogically sound teaching tools is a very different question than whether or not today's textbook companies are useful or necessary, on any level, to the work of higher education. I would argue that they are not. Moreover, any effort to combat corporatization and "retake the university for education"[7] must include not only a focused resistance to "textbook consumerism"[8] but also a deliberate redeployment of faculty resources in the realm of knowledge production. Challenging the consumerism behind "textbook-driven composition curricula"[9] is only half the battle; we must also mobilize teacher and student knowledge work in ways that render commercial textbook adoption unnecessary, even inimical, to our work as composition instructors.

In a panel presentation at this year's Conference on College Composition and Communication (entitled "Ten Thousand New Reasons For Never Adopting a Composition Textbook"), St. John's University writing professors Roseanne Gatto and Derek Owens encouraged compositionists to create alternatives to traditional textbook production and consumption. Gatto, along with Claude Hurlburt (Indiana University of Pennsylvania), championed a laboratory approach whereby students produce their own text documents (or "books") via expressive writing and recursive workshopping activities. Owens

introduced a new initiative at St. John's Institute for Writing Studies, "The Ten Thousand Writing Projects Project," the purpose of which is to create an online forum for "sharing informed and sustainable composition curricula" with a wider audience of composition teachers and students. Owens also encouraged the use of library e-reserves as an alternative to course rhetorics and readers, suggesting that administrators concerned about program coherence might pursue this option instead of opting for a core textbook.

One further way to resist "textbook consumerism" and better utilize academic resources is to make textbook production itself instrumental to classroom practice. One initiative recently launched at Factory School (factoryschool.org) is the Community Handbook Project Wiki, which offers an alternative to traditional textbook production by changing the way we write, produce, and distribute texts for classroom use. The original Handbook began in 2003 as a freely accessible collection of handouts, worksheets, and lesson plans on writing, web design, grammar, mechanics, and other topics. In early 2007, Factory School introduced the Community Handbook Project (CHP) Wiki as a way to extend and redirect this early archival project into the realm of collaborative, multi-disciplinary content development.

The CHP has one basic goal, as noted on the wiki main page: to "collect, develop, organize, and distribute instructional resources for use in a variety of learning contexts." As a profit-averse venture involving college and university professors and students, the Handbook project attempts a frontal assault on the textbook industry by offering "knowledge laundering" as a strategic alternative to knowledge commodification. In practice, knowledge laundering creates a different relationship between information production and information consumption that departs significantly from the commercial textbook system now in place. Under current arrangements, students and most writing teachers operate at the bottom of what James Boyle has called the "information economy" pyramid, providing the "raw materials" for capitalist expropriation and functioning as the "ultimate 'audience'" for the products gathered and shaped by those at the "top of the pyramid of entitlement claims" (xii). The goal of the CHP is to topple the entitlement pyramid and place the "audience" in immediate contact with the material it is otherwise asked, or usually forced, to consume. At heart this means that students and teachers jointly write, compile, and use the Community Handbook using wiki (collaborative editing) software and other techniques helpful to the laundering process.

One version of the project, implemented this past Spring in my English Composition courses at St. John's, took the form of student group work focused on researching, compiling, and then presenting assorted writing, research, and editing "rules" relevant to their developing research projects. For two weeks,

4. Merriah Fairchild, "Ripoff 101: How the Current Practices of the Textbook Industry Drive Up the Cost of College Textbooks" 4.

5. Ibid. 5.

6. Kurt Spellmeyer "The Great Way: Reading and Writing in Freedom" 45.

7. Ohman. 45.

8. Claude Hurlbert, "A Place in Which to Stand" 357.

9. Ibid. 357.

students mined Writing Center resources (books, tutors, websites) for conventional Handbook "wisdom" related to their assigned research areas. They then performed and/or presented their findings to the rest of the class. Results included grammar skits, digital slideshow and video presentations, in-class games (e.g., a web-based "fragments and run-ons" game based on the game show Jeopardy), and a portfolio of class exercises, handouts, and worksheets generated from their collective laundering activities.

In short, students learned about composition (i.e., the knowledge they found "sealed" in commercial handbooks and on the Web) by teaching it to each other. Further, through collaborative research, done in the interest of questioning and understanding otherwise arcane handbook rule sets, students became content authors as opposed to an audience targeted via conventional instruction and content delivery. The Community Handbook resides, therefore, not so much in the output (content gathered and organized on a wiki, in a book, in a bunch of handouts) but more so in the throughput, the activity of laundering knowledge and presenting it in a form both useful and specific to the "peculiarities of context"[10] that students establish for themselves. As one CHP participant wrote, the Handbook project "allowed students to see what other students do not understand. [Presenters] knew a lot about the information, but were able to learn more because of the questions the other students asked." Regarding the group research work, this student also noted that "getting the knowledge from all these sources was much better because it kept me more focused becuase [sic] there was more variation."

The CHP wiki is also a development center for custom textbook production. One recent product of the Handbook Project is the Vision Quest Guidebook, a manual on writing, reading, and research developed this past Spring for my ENG 1000C first-year writing courses. Published using print-on-demand technology, and distributed (at cost) to students in the first week of the semester, the Guidebook functioned as a ready reference for course-specific writing and research activities but now resides on the wiki as a set of content modules available for future courses (i.e., future laundering) at this or other institutions. Other textbook projects currently underway at Factory School include a dictionary of literary terms, a literature anthology, a "project exposition" workbook, and a 'psychogeography' reader—all emphasizing student-teacher editorial collaboration, and all linked to specific curriculum development activities at St. John's University and Queensborough Community College.

One of Factory School's aims is to facilitate this kind of local, grassroots customization of text/hand/guide/workbook materials (using wiki, print-on-demand, and other technologies) as a strategic alternative to today's commercial textbook "logic." In brief, participants in the Community Handbook

Project contribute content modules in exchange for design consultation, free archiving, and access to other modules. Teachers and students, in short, develop their own textbooks and do so at very little or no cost. To be clear, this is not an "open-source" initiative so much as an emerging information "co-op" for which ownership, copyright, content, and user access issues must be resolved as "peculiarities" unique to current and future collaborations. Also, securing promotion and tenure credit for these kinds of production activities requires new disciplinary economies that reward "alternative but valuable forms of labor."[11] As English teachers, we can make a strong case for the pedagogical value of collaborative, student-centered learning activities that feed our related research and scholarly endeavors. Taking that argument to fellow faculty and administrators willing to listen, I'd suggest, is the next order of business.

As Claude Hurlburt writes, students don't need standardized textbooks; they need "options" specific to their writing, reading, designing, editing, and production needs.[12] Teachers need options, too – for how to develop and share their practices, celebrate the eclectic nature of the field, and participate in disciplinary knowledge production without having to sell out to the corporate textbook giants. Off-grid pedagogies and production activities, such as those described above, are options worth considering, particularly for those of us looking for ways to resist the corporatization of higher education and retake the university for education.

10. Hurlburt. 357.

11. David B. Downing, The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace. 39.

12. Hurlburt. 355.

Works Cited

Bousquet, Marc, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola, Eds. *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

Downing, David B. *The Knowledge Contract: Politics and Paradigms in the Academic Workplace*. Lincoln and London: U Nebraska P., 2005.

Fairchild, Merriah. "Ripoff 101: How the Current Practices of the Textbook Industry Drive Up the Cost of College Textbooks." Los Angeles: CALPIRG Higher Education Project, 2004.

Hurlbert, Claude. "A Place in Which to Stand." Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers. Eds. Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana, IL: NCTE Press, 2006: 353-357.

Ohmann, Richard. "Citizenship and Literacy Work: Thoughts Without a Conclusion." *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*. Eds. Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, Leo Parascondola. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004: 36-45.

Pollitz, John H. and Anne Christie. "The High Cost of Textbooks: A Convergence of Academic Libraries, Campus Bookstores, Publishers?" *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship*, 7.2 (Summer 2006). < http://southernlibrarianship.icaap. org/content/v07n02/pollitz_j01.htm>

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "The Great Way: Reading and Writing in Freedom." *(Re)Visioning Composition Textbooks*. Eds. Xin Liu Gale, Fredric G. Gale. Albany: State U of New York P, 1999: 45-60.