**No More Backpacks**

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**The Promises of this New Kind of Textbook**

This new eTextbook enhances the learning of students in several dramatic ways.

1. ***Exploration becomes more important than digestion***. The old textbooks would stress coverage of content in chunks or nuggets that were easily digested. In contrast, eTextbooks support a wide range of learning excursions. That's not a word normally associated with textbooks. The eTestbooks offer many opportunities to move across a rich assortment of documents, images and multimedia resources that the old textbook could not offer. Each reader may wander, wonder, pursue and ponder according to personal preferences and style. There are better opportunities to focus the learning around curiosity and questions of import. The old textbooks told the student what to think about history, math and science. The new ones will allow for a more individualized approach. Each learner can develop her or his own understandings. The old textbooks explained while the new ones will challenge learners to wrestle with quandaries, ambiguities and enigmas.

2. ***Each page of an eTextbook is the start of something.*** The pages are meant to provoke, inspire and intrigue. They are not like dominoes tumbling in a row. They goad, spur, prick, sting, prod, egg on, incite, rouse, stir, move, stimulate, motivate, excite, inflame, work/fire up, impel (list from the Oxford American Writer's Thesaurus). They are a jumping off point. The reader is meant to fashion meaning and approach the book as an opportunity rather than a chore. Those who subscribe to constructivist approaches to learning will applaud this opportunity, while those who cling to coverage and more pedantic strategies will wonder why this is an improvement.
3. ***eTextbooks offer material that is visually enticing and delightful.*** Even the best of the old textbooks suffered from print limitations that are no problem for eTextbooks. In a culture that is saturated with images, the old textbook is outdated and sleep inducing. Our young grow up on a diet of rich imagery but walk into schools that offer a very limited menu. This gap creates some serious disconnects. But the eTextbook promises to whet student appetites and awaken their enthusiasm. They offer sound and fury that may signify a great deal.

Like the music industry, the textbook industry may be dallying and delaying rather than exploring and developing materials for use with devices like the iPad. When large companies delay, they may provide opportunities for small and agile entrepreneurs to step in to seize and re-shape a market. Has this already happened with K-12 textbooks? I went looking for such a company and found Inkling (<http://www.inkling.com>) They claim to be inventing electronic textbooks that exploit the special possibilities of an iPad instead of mimicking a traditional paper textbook.

We started with a vision for a better textbook: one that was interactive and engaging, one that took advantage of the opportunities afforded by new media like iPad. But we aren’t just reinventing publishing, or reinventing the book. We’re reinventing the way people learn.

I downloaded a free chapter from their textbook *Experience History.* True to their goal, this U.S. history text takes advantage of the iPad's features in a number of ways. The text is larger and quite attractive. There seem to be more illustrations and photographs, each of which can be enlarged and explored, in contrast with the other texts I examined which did not allow any real zooming or enlargement.

Reading this chapter is a visually enjoyable experience with page design clearly a high priority. It feels more like reading the *New Yorker* than a text book. Another aspect of this text was the strong stance taken on the failings of Andrew Johnson when he took over the presidency after Lincoln's assassination. History texts are notoriously balanced, impartial and dry. In an effort to avoid bias and distortion, they tend to downplay drama, resist controversy and drain the lifeblood out of the story. Reading them is often quite sleep inducing. This text is lively, spirited and a bit spicy.

Furthermore, his prickly personality made conflict between the president and Congress inevitable. Scarred by his humble origins, Johnson remained an outsider throughout his life. When challenged or criticized he became tactless and inflexible, alienating even those who sought to work with him.

Not everyone will be comfortable with a history book that speaks with such authority and judgment, but it does make for good reading. The description of the political conflicts after the war dramatizes and clarifies the issues quite well. As you read through a chapter, you can stop to insert bookmarks, highlight text and take notes, features that take advantage of the iPad's touch screen capabilities. You may also come to what are called "dueling documents" - in this Reconstruction chapter there are three of them:

Debate swirled around not only the conditions southern states needed to fulfill to return to the Union but also the rights of citizenship granted to former slaves. At war’s end, African Americans held a number of conventions to set forth their views (Document 1). Andrew Johnson privately conveyed to white southern leaders his idea of how they should act (Document 2). And Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania spoke for Radical Republicans (Document 3).

Rather than interrupt the flow of the narrative, Dueling Documents provide an opportunity to step aside and wrestle with primary source materials. At the end, there are questions designed to provoke inference and analysis.

Each of the writers recommends that African Americans receive the vote in some way. Which document is the most radical? Which the least so? Who does President Johnson refer to as “the adversary”? How does he intend to “foil” the Radicals? And what does Thaddeus Steven not speak about? Why?

In a similar fashion, the text provides "asides" called "Daily Life" that provide insight into the housing and living conditions of the people (in this case freed slaves) of the times. The iPad makes such asides work quite well, allowing the reader to step out of the flow of the narrative for a few minutes. Another type of "aside" is called "the Historian's Toolbox." In this chapter there is one called "Dressed to Kill" that challenges the reader to interpret an advertisement dealing with the Ku Klux Klan.

In what ways does the advertisement speak of experiences both frightening and humorous? In terms of popular culture, do modern horror films sometimes combine both terror and humor? Assess how this dynamic of horror and jest might have worked in terms of the different groups—white northerners, white southerners, African Americans—perceiving the Klan’s activities.

The use of asides exploits the capabilities of the iPad to provide learning experiences quite different from page turners of the past.