

On Custom: Revisiting the Relationship between Publishers and WPAs

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that custom textbook publishing offers new opportunities for WPA agency and thus can potentially reshape the relationship between publishers and WPAs. Revisiting the work of Libby Miles on this relationship, I survey those working in publishing to consider the ways in which custom publishing provides new avenues for us to participate in the processes of market construction. Given this potential, we can no longer decry the uniformity of textbooks, because custom publishing provides unprecedented opportunities to shape our textbooks and the market as a whole.

In her award-winning article “Constructing Composition: Reproduction and WPA Agency in Textbook Publishing,” Libby Miles challenges the seemingly “normative and reproductive” nature of composition textbooks by arguing that Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) “need to interrogate our own complicity in composition textbook publishing processes, and that there is considerable revision we can enact by inserting ourselves—as WPAs—into the process at appropriate points” (28). Miles suggests that the uniformity of available textbooks is less a function of publisher inertia—an unwillingness to reflect advances in the field—than it is a kind of conservatism inherent in the field itself. As a counter to this conservatism, she identifies key points in the publishing process where WPAs can exercise their agency to generate change, primarily in our roles as consultants and reviewers. Since the publication of Miles’ article in 2000, one of the more significant changes in textbook publishing has been the growth of custom publishing, which allows WPAs to select precisely the content they want by adding, removing, or even writing their own material for textbooks. In this sense, WPAs have unprecedented control over the shape of textbooks;

custom textbook publishing thus perhaps offers yet another site of agency. In this essay, I would like to revisit Miles' work to consider the implications of custom publishing in relation to textbook production and WPA agency. Given the power of choice inherent in custom textbooks, can we continue to decry the uniformity of textbooks when we can have any thing we want? Conversely, how can we use our power of choice to remake available textbooks?

In many ways the word "custom" itself is at the heart of my interests here, for it is a word with several unique valences. On the one hand, as that which is habitual, "custom" represents the very inertial forces Miles identifies. In this sense "custom publishing" is the proper term for traditional publishing—to the extent that available textbooks are uniform it is because they reflect what is *customary* in the field and what teachers are *accustomed* to. At the same time, however, "custom" represents the potential for change, allowing WPA *customers* to *customize* textbooks for their individual programs. Custom also has a regulatory function, one that indexes the economic field formed between WPA and publishers. Like a nation's *customs* department, the process of publishing regulates what is and is not allowed from the field into the market and thus the classroom. Moreover, "custom"—in the sense of a tariff paid and in the sense of patronage of a business—points to the entire multiplex of cultural and economic factors at play in textbook publishing as well. To meditate "on custom" in relation to publishing, then, is to consider the complex forces between inertia and advancement, between economics and the academy, and between businesses and knowledge.

To explore these issues, I attempted to replicate Miles' work by asking those working in textbook publishing to complete an anonymous online survey. As the survey responses and my own experiences with custom publishing will suggest, this avenue of text production is not without its own set of limitations and challenges. However, what remains clear is that custom publishing represents another—and potentially extremely powerful—site of agency.

ON THE SCHOLARSHIP

That there is a problem with composition textbooks is well established in the literature of the field. Since at least the 1960s, critics have found them "imitative" and "repetitive" or "insular" with a "similarity of tone" that makes them all seem the same (Thoma 118; Rose 65; Coles 136). Reading particular texts or genres of texts through lenses of race, class, gender, and sexuality, some scholars have also faulted them for reproducing familiar ide-

ologies (Liu; Bryant; Helgeson; France; Marinara et al; Jordan, “Between”; Jordan, “Rereading”). Others find that they literally discipline teachers and students—“effectively shap[ing] teacher and student subjectivities” (Hawhee 504; Connors; Janangelo; Zebroski). Yet others reject textbooks altogether for making static what is always a dynamic process (Rose; Bleich; Spellmeyer). The nearly universal critique, though, has been that composition textbooks do not reflect advances in the field (Stewart; Gale and Gale; F. Gale; X. Gale). As Arn and Charlene Tibbets observe, “*Teachers want what is familiar to them. The results of research are usually unfamiliar and therefore unwanted*” (857).

In his 1986 essay “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline” Robert Connors strikes a similar note and finds, moreover, that this disjuncture between textbooks and theory is as old as composition textbooks themselves, reflecting in part the historically recent development of composition as a discipline. Textbooks, he suggests, are always conservative, and usefully so: they “provide stability amid the shifting winds of theoretical argument,” and transmit the established truths of a discipline as cutting edge theoretical models are worked out in journal publications (190). But because for so long there were no advanced scholars publishing in composition journals (in part because there were no journals), “the usual disciplinary balance between journals and textbooks was destroyed; the conservative influence of textbooks became pervasive. There was nothing to move textbooks forward in correspondence with new discoveries in the field. There were no new discoveries” (190). Even now that our field has journals that conservative influence persists. Though Connors believes that textbooks have begun to shift with the rise of the discipline (reflected by the fact that he is, after all, publishing in a journal in the field), he also finds that it remains true that “the forces of tradition and dependency are very strong” (192).

Kathleen Welch also finds that textbooks do not reflect composition theory (269). In her oft-cited 1987 essay “Ideology and Freshman Textbook Production: The Place of Theory in Writing Pedagogy,” she identifies a tacit, implicit predilection for the classical canons and modes in the textbooks available at the time of her study. This predilection operates as an “unconscious theory,” one that “appears to deny composition theory” (269). In arguing for a radical revision of textbooks that foregrounds contextualized student writing instead of decontextualized excerpts and “perfect” models, she claims that “Both sides must change, but the change must begin with the textbook publisher” (279).

That change clearly had not happened by the end of the century. Writing in 1999, Gary Olson similarly points the finger at textbook publishers, positively vilifying them in the process. Relating his own frustrations at try-

ing to bring a forward-thinking textbook to market, Olson declaims that “The bottom line for these clerks (I hesitate to call them editors) is always profit, never innovation; always salability, never quality; always marketability, never pedagogical effectiveness—a clear example of how capitalist impulse overrides pedagogical or scholarly efficaciousness” (x). Though noting that the dynamics of textbook production are complex, he still believes that textbooks represent a “normalizing, even anti-progressive” force (ix).

More recent critiques suggest that this problem persists into the new millennium. In 2005, for example, Jay Jordan examined composition textbooks that focus on multiculturalism, noting the ways they failed to enact current understandings of the complexity that multiculturalism demands. More recently he has echoed this critique, writing on textbooks with a cultural studies focus, finding “apparent comfort within textbooks about how cultures and students’ relationships to them are presented, studied, and written about” (W465). Similarly, Martha Marinara, Jonathan Alexander, William P. Banks, and Samantha Blackmon, writing in 2009, take composition textbooks to task for their treatment of queer concerns. Finding representations of queerness marginalized or reductive in composition textbooks, the authors conclude that “there is still much work to be done in creating textbooks that invite students to think critically and usefully about the interconnections among sexuality, literacy, and writing” (272).

This body of work is a potent examination of how our field transmits itself to future scholars through undergraduate education (or fails to do so), yet the problem with critiques such as these—and critique in general—is that it infrequently offers direction for change. As Miles observes, with such analyses the “entertainment value is high, but the opportunity for agency, for social action, is nil” (“Constructing” 29). Thus, with Miles, I am more interested in the relationships formed in textbook production and circulation—between author and publisher and WPA and teacher and sales representative and student and bookstore manager—for it is in these relationships that sites of agency open to allow for change and new direction. As Miles notes in “Disturbing Practices,” “Ultimately, the drive for institutional change in composition scholarship and pedagogy reduces to a question of agency. In what interstices might it be found or created, and through what avenues might we affect institutional and practical change?” (765).

Contiguous with the tradition of textbook critique, several scholars have proposed answers to that question. In responding to Welch’s work, Kevin Davis suggests in 1988 that the answer is not to change textbooks but to change the cultures of our programs and departments: “By being good teachers of writing, each of us can help maybe fifty students a semester. By

changing the mind of only one colleague, we can double that number. By changing a whole department, we can begin to make a difference” (237). Through working on search committees, training new teachers, and teaching graduate courses in composition theory and pedagogy, Davis believes we can stop teachers from being taught themselves by textbooks (237). In a direct response to Welch’s call, he sees agency resting within our field itself: “Let’s not expect the textbook companies to change what we need to change ourselves” (237).

Writing in 1992, George Otte locates yet another site for agency: those “weighty yea- and nay-sayers who are only rarely mentioned in articles on textbook publishing,” reviewers. Otte specifically examines the question of accessibility of textbook material for students. Using responses to a textbook he proposed, he finds that reviewers universally devalue the potential of their own students, using a chorus of “Nobody Knows the Students I’ve Seen” and suggesting through their comments that “the groves of academe are full of green and shady spots but my own plot is barren and desolate; my own students aren’t up to snuff.” Otte, however, doesn’t specifically advocate any response to these widespread beliefs in the field, other than generally suggesting that accessibility of material should not play as large a role in textbook production as enabling students to gain access to the cultural capital unlocked in difficult or challenging readings. Still, in drawing our attention to the ways in which reviewers respond to composition textbooks, Otte points to another site of agency.

For W. Ross Winterowd, agency is more closely bound to legal and economic concerns; thus he draws our attention to the written and unwritten contracts that govern publishing. Unwritten contracts, in particular, emerge from the integrity and mutual respect that bind author and editor through a “bookish” culture and provide a productive and respectful working relationship (Winterowd 142). The problem, in Winterowd’s analysis, is the increasing conglomeration and corporatization of textbook publishing (in full swing as he was writing in 1989), which brings with it an increased reliance on written contracts and a corresponding devaluation of unwritten ones (150). Authorship is agency in this analysis, as Winterowd advises potential textbook authors to be wary of contracts, to examine them closely, and to be aware of all the legal rights and pitfalls involved.

In his 1999 essay “Of Handbooks and Handbags: Composition Textbook Publishing after the Deal Decade,” Peter Mortensen also notes a shift occasioned by the conglomeration of publishing companies during the late twentieth century. Like Winterowd, he finds that corporatization meant a loss of “bookish” culture, specifically through the rise of shareholder activism, the idea that “shareholders, and not company management [editors, in

the case of publishing], should direct business decisions toward increased profitability” (222). Under such a paradigm profit, not pedagogy, becomes the standard for publication. One avenue for action he identifies in response to this trend is a kind of “investor screen” for textbook adopters, in which WPAs favor textbooks from publishers/corporations that acknowledge teachers and students as more than numbers (224). Mortensen also points to student agency in this process, arguing for textbooks that draw from cultural studies and material cultural analysis to equip students with skills to “analyze fruitfully the material culture of textbook production and consumption in which they are implicated” (226).

Each of these scholars points to potential avenues for change but in her analysis of the dynamics of publishing Miles most clearly offers sites of agency, following the earlier lead of Winterowd and Mortensen by focusing on the underlying economics of textbook production (“Constructing” 29). After examining the ways in which these texts function in systems of cultural and material reproduction, Miles interviews those who work in the field in order to determine how publishers construct the market of composition. And it is here that she finds opportunities for agency; we WPAs have an opportunity to make change: “If we aren’t happy with the instructional materials commercially available, then WPAs need to act together to make significant changes in how that market is discursively constructed within the walls of the publishing house” (Miles, “Constructing” 35). Miles further specifies the locations of WPA agency in this process, including “developmental reviews, consultancies, adoption decisions, campus visit reports, and author feedback,” echoing Otte by bringing attention to the roles of reviewers (“Constructing” 35). In each of these locations, publishers use input from WPAs to construct the field and hence the market for composition textbooks. Acting within these sites provides us an opportunity to shift those constructions in ways that are theoretically informed. Ultimately, given that our discipline is “rife with internal contradictions and inconsistencies,” Miles “urge[s] a constellation of actions that in their collectivity will shift the textbook publishing paradigm in more theoretically—and pedagogically—informed directions” (“Constructing” 47).

In identifying these points of agency, Miles also invokes one common thread running throughout the scholarship of the field from the 1960s to as late as 2010: the monumental inertia—whether from publishers or from the field itself—that creates an innate resistance to change. However, I would argue that custom publishing represents a significant shift in the dynamics examined in the scholarship on textbook publication so far. Rather than attempting large-scale alteration of a field, an industry, or a market, custom publishing allows for small and responsive changes that, cumula-

tively, promise to alter the overall landscape of composition textbooks. By localizing the “market” to a specific writing program—or even a specific class—concerns about shareholders, reviewers, editors, or consultants are potentially bypassed. In a world where every teacher can have a text custom tailored to her or his teaching, pedagogy, and theoretical inclination, how do the dynamics of textbook publication change and how does the problem of textbook inertia persist, if at all?

To answer this question, I turn as Miles did to publishers themselves. In examining the results of a survey of those within the industry, I hope to illuminate the ways in which this significant shift in publishing strategy creates new avenues for action, even if those new avenues come with risks of their own.

ON THE SURVEY

My goal in using a survey was two-fold: to replicate Miles’ methodology in order to see any shifts in the processes of publishing that she identified and to join Miles in asking publishers to participate in this critical conversation. Thus in the summer of 2008 I asked each of the local textbook sales representatives for my school to forward a call for volunteers to anyone in their companies who they felt might be interested in completing an anonymous online survey about custom publishing. I asked that they not limit their consideration only to those people working directly in custom publishing; I was interested in getting input from across each organization. Six people (all with at least ten years of experience in the industry) completed the survey, representing three of the four major textbook publishers.¹ Admittedly, this sample size is small, yet it reflects the number of companies and respondents represented in Miles’ essay and thus provides me, I hope, a means broadly to replicate her research. Questions, available in the appendix to this essay, focused on the role custom publishing plays in their work and company as well as their perceptions of how custom publishing had changed the relationship between publishers and WPAs. Like Miles, I also provided an opportunity to “set the record straight” by clearing up any misconceptions they felt WPAs had about publishers; I further offered them a chance to respond to the field as represented by the critical literature on textbook publishing as well as a chance to respond to Miles’ original work. Those respondents who indicated a willingness to be contacted after the survey were sent a draft of this essay and given an opportunity to change or elaborate their responses.

To start, the very pervasiveness of custom publishing in the textbook industry today underscores its significance in reconsidering the processes

of market construction and textbook evaluation examined by Miles. One quick index of custom's extensive presence within the textbook industry is the fact that though the respondents held positions in various aspects of publishing—editorial, sales, technology, and marketing—all of them reported working with custom publishing in some way. Custom publishing thus touches many disparate divisions within a company. While custom's saturation within publishing immediately suggests its potential as a site for change, the survey responses also indicate that custom has changed the jobs of the respondents very little; thus the processes that Miles examines might remain unchanged as well. One question in the survey dealt specifically with how custom publishing has changed the respondents' jobs. As one respondent, who asked to be called "Anonymous Sales Manager" (ASM), indicated, "I don't know that I'd say [custom publishing] has changed my job, since [it] has been in existence since I came in to college publishing. The advancement of custom publishing has helped me to better meet customer needs though," a statement that reflects many of the responses to this question.

Nevertheless the very extent of custom publishing in the textbook industry today does indicate one way in which it already challenges traditional modes of textbook production and reproduction: sales figures, which are one of the first avenues of market construction that Miles considers. According to Miles, publishers use data from sources such as Monument Information Resource, which tracks the numbers of both new and used textbooks sold, to understand what textbooks WPAs select and therefore presumably want ("Constructing" 35). Based on this data, publishers provide more of the same. Given the importance of such sales figures, custom publishing's success offers an alternative to this process of material reproduction. As ASM notes "I coach the reps that I manage to make as many customers as possible aware of our custom options. In my experience, customers who use custom textbooks tend to become, and remain, highly satisfied, and we tend to retain those customers (which, in a bottom-line fashion, means more consistent sales)." If publishers chase numbers, then custom offers an alternative avenue, one that responds more directly to the theoretical inclinations of the entire spectrum of WPAs.²

But sales figures are only one strand in the web of market construction for publishers. One of Miles' most significant insights is the fact that publishers do not construct an understanding of the market of composition solely "in house" by analyzing data such as sales; rather, they turn to compositionists themselves to formulate the market, working with consultants and reviewers to evaluate potential textbooks and to construct an understanding of the field. Custom publishing, of course, uses neither of these

and at least some of the survey responses suggest that this then creates a new avenue for textbooks to reach publication. The survey respondent who asked to be called “Imagine,” a publisher’s representative, illustrates: “Many professors want to use their own materials that have little or no chance of being mass published because they fill a unique niche and in the past these materials would have been copied at the copy center and disseminated to the students.” Imagine’s response not only underscores again the ways in which the financial success of custom publishing reshapes processes of textbook reproduction but more importantly it also directly indicates how custom publishing offers a way for innovative, radical, or just *different* textbooks to find publication. Those materials that “would have been copied at the copy center” are also those materials that would have been blunted or rejected by the processes of consulting and review that Miles examines. With custom, the only market that matters is the one created by one writing program or one instructor—“niche” materials thus find publication. The response of the survey respondent who asked to be called Acquisitions Editor (AE) is also interesting in this respect: “I see custom publishing only continuing to grow dramatically. We are a nation of critical thinkers and choice is paramount to personal and group satisfaction. Being able to customize a text is increasingly more attractive from that stance” That which the critical literature most finds missing—choice—is also that which drives custom publishing. In turn, that choice sidesteps reviewers and consultants and thus offers an alternative site for WPAs to take action in response to publishers’ construction of the market.

In exploring the ways in which textbooks are produced, reproduced, and de-produced, Miles also points to the relationship between publishers and WPAs, one which (to judge from comments such as Olson’s) can be at times fraught. How then has custom publishing changed this relationship? According to ASM, not much at all: “Publishers are still doing what they have always done . . . trying to meet the needs of a customer base.” ASM’s response is particularly interesting because it suggests that the kinds of problems noted in the critical literature do not exist for publishers. That is, according to publishers, all publishers have ever done is try to meet the needs of their customers, WPAs. In Miles’ analysis their attempts to do so have created uniformity in textbooks not because of publisher conservatism but because of the inertia of our field itself. Custom doesn’t challenge the relationship between publishers and WPAs; survey respondents suggest instead that custom only reinforces that relationship as it currently exists. Though Technology Specialist Sarah Smith admits that “Publishers will do almost anything to get the big dollars of a writing program adoption” she also indicates that custom publishing helps achieve that goal because

“Those publishers who have a good custom division have become more competitive and more able to solve the writing programs’ needs.”

Following the natural course of matching resources to sales, publishers have grown custom options rather than or in addition to simply producing copycat versions of bestselling textbooks. Given that any professor can have any text with any choice of pedagogical or theoretical inclination, publishers no longer construct the market exclusively through consultants and reviews. Custom publishing thus intervenes in two of the most important market construction processes that Miles identifies. In doing so, it also extends the existing relationships between publishers and WPAs.

That is, it extends the relationship from the perspective of those working in publishing. That sense of a relationship—specifically a partnership—is a consistent theme across the survey responses. Many respondents described the relationship between publishers and WPAs as a partnership or used that term in elaborating how their companies imagined or presented themselves; other terms used, such as “symbiotic” and “mutually interdependent,” echo this understanding (Editor). Like “custom” itself, “partner” is a multivalent term. On the one hand it invokes the “bookish” culture that Winterowd sees uniting editor and author; at the same time, however, it invokes the kind of corporate strategies that Mortensen finds as a consequence of conglomeration. For those working in publishing, though, partnering seems to be not a business tactic but a genuine attempt to build relationships with writing programs and WPAs. For example, Imagine, a publisher’s representative, reflects a particular investment:

I am proud of the company I work for. They are proactive, ethical and the best educational publisher out there, and with that said, there is no one else that I would rather work for within this industry. My company wants to be a partner in education, they want to provide solutions that meet needs and lastly, they want to make the world a better place.

Our cynical sides might smirk at the idea of textbook publishers trying “to make the world a better place,” but Imagine also underscores the sense of “bookishness”: “Publishing is still a very noble profession, and good publishers are continually striving to get better at their craft by providing diverse and creative solutions that meet various program needs.” Imagine’s use of the term “craft” invokes the book culture by aligning publishing with art and creation rather than sterile business processes. In the minds of these respondents, custom enhances the “craft” of publishing and enhances too the partnership between publishers and WPAs. As Senior Marketing Manager Roberta Pempiller says, custom “has made us more partners. We

work together to create resources instructors want in the classroom [sic] - no more, no less.”

Reading through both the critical literature and these survey responses, though, suggests that each side of this partnership has a very different understanding of the other and, indeed, that might account for some of the tensions located in the scholarship surrounding this issue. Specifically, despite the theme of partnership, respondents also indicated that the market is a crucial factor in publishing decisions, entirely consistent with Miles’ findings. Smith says, “Publishers don’t really care about any particular slant, they just want to be sure the market will buy it and the market it [sic] big enough to support the publisher’s investment.” Smith’s response, of course, validates many of the criticisms located in the literature—specifically, the fact that the market drives textbook publishing. Pepmiller further illustrates why a “conservative” label might be applied to publishers, observing that

There is always a balance between investment and need in business. It is not cost effective to always publish a text for a minor part of the market. Our books must strike a balance of quality content, flexibility for the instructor and appeal across various approaches and theories.

But of course, as Imagine noted above, custom allows even minor parts of the market to craft a text suited to the particular needs of a writing program. Thus while the market remains a central point of contention in the relationship between publishers and WPAs, custom publishing potentially allows us to reshape that market by customizing through our own individual needs.

To the extent a problem remains with composition textbooks, custom offers new opportunity to effect change. By altering or even bypassing the processes of market construction used by publishers to determine what should or should not be published, custom potentially allows for more flexibility and indeed more theory than ever before. Since publishers see themselves as doing what they’ve always done—meeting our needs as WPAs—the onus of action returns to us. I do not mean to suggest that custom is a singular solution, and I will in fact examine its risks and dangers below. Yet as part of the “constellation of actions” (Miles, “Constructing” 47) that offers opportunities for social action and thus change, custom represents a significant development, one with the potential to remake both publishing and our field. But only if we choose to engage it, and to do so reflectively.

ON ETHICS

A reflective and informed engagement with custom publishing is particularly important given the ethical issues involved. Before considering the practical implications of custom publishing for WPAs I feel it necessary to consider some of these ethical questions. In doing so I also wish to make it clear that I am not advocating the use of custom publishing *per se*. Rather, I only wish to suggest that given the role it plays in publishing today it is vital for WPAs to respond to it as a site of agency as we continue the conversation between our field and the publishing industry.

Perhaps the central ethical concern in using custom published textbooks is economic, recalling the financial valences of the word “custom” itself—particularly as patronage of a business. After all, though survey respondents regularly represented WPAs as their customers, the truth of the matter is that *students* are the *actual* customers for textbooks since they are the ones who are required to purchase them. In using custom published textbooks WPAs become a part of that economic transaction. Of course, we are always already implicated in that transaction with every textbook adoption. As Richard Ohmann pointed out at a panel with publishers held during a 1970 meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association,

Although publishers and students *look* like the sellers and buyers, respectively, in important ways the textbook market is a set of transactions between professors who write the books and professors who adopt them, thus guaranteeing their purchase by an audience of students. (Mead et al 12)

Ohmann’s formulation highlights the fact that we as WPAs, teachers, and authors are the primary agents in this economic exchange; publishers are only intermediaries. In this sense, perhaps one of the advantages of custom publishing for our discipline is precisely the way in which it fully reveals and indeed spotlights that economic dimension: with custom publishing there is no avoiding our inevitable entanglement in the economic lives of students. Were custom always a means to lowering textbook prices, this ethical question would be largely moot. But, while that is potentially the case, it is not always so, and moreover, custom further allows WPAs to add royalties onto custom textbooks, which some might consider a hidden tax on students and which certainly complicates the ethical questions involved. Given the current concern across the nation with textbook prices for all courses at all levels of education, these ethical questions are particularly acute. Yet avoiding custom publishing doesn’t resolve these issues; it merely continues to obscure them.

I do not presume to answer these thorny questions. I will, however, share that in my own practice I have found Richard E. Miller's concept of the hybrid persona of the intellectual-bureaucrat useful, since it acknowledges the economic aspects of higher education and takes as a given the material limitations of working in a university while proceeding to locate agency within those constraints. Miller argues against invocations of "an alternative, free space where a different kind of learning and teaching [free from material and bureaucratic considerations] might go on" (7). This utopian vision is the very one that Otte identifies as allowing reviewers to decry textbooks: the "green and shady spots" of academe are always someplace else while our students are all too imperfect because they are all too real. For Miller, the rejection of such utopian visions allows for action within bureaucracy, which then creates the potential for change: it is "at the micro-bureaucratic level of local praxis that one can begin to exercise a material influence" on education (46). In terms of working within the ethical issues around the economic implications of textbooks and custom publishing, that has meant for me working with others within my own local bureaucratic context. That is, decisions about how to implement custom textbooks are never mine alone but result from work with the writing committee of my department as well as input from teachers working within our program. Embracing the persona of the intellectual-bureaucrat has allowed me to recognize that textbook costs are one issue among many that must be considered, including budgetary constraints, photocopying costs, available resources for students, available resources for teachers, class sizes, professional development, state laws governing writing classes, and local, institutional, and professional outcomes for these classes. Within these contexts, we as a program keep economic considerations in mind. But because those considerations cannot be eliminated we seek to balance them with other competing concerns.

Yet the ethics involved are not only matters of economics but extend into our understanding of both our field and the academy itself. As teachers and as academics we are deeply invested in peer review, using it not only in our classrooms but also in promotion and tenure. Custom publishing potentially challenges this foundational practice, since it suggests that content written by any teacher is equivalent to content written by leading figures of the field, carefully vetted by processes of review and revision. Frankly, without peer review, custom publishing allows for the creation of reactionary textbooks even further disengaged from current pedagogical theory, potentially exacerbating the problem seen in national textbooks. Is a textbook of original custom content as good as a national textbook? And is it ethical to use untested and un-reviewed materials? Certainly, such a text-

book carries little if any weight in decisions about tenure, and in that sense the institution has provided its own answer. And while embracing custom publishing does not *require* abandoning peer review it can call into question how we determine, develop, and value the quality of our teaching materials.

This particular ethical question seems to involve additional questions concerning the relationship between theory and practice in our discipline and the value of lore in teaching. Those issues have engendered their own discussions in the field, and I do not mean to reproduce them (let alone resolve them) here. My own practice is informed by considerations of this schism by scholars such as Arnetha Ball and Ted Lardner as well as Louise Wetherbee Phelps. Phelps in particular argues that practice has as much to contribute to theory as theory offers practice, and in this sense, the use of custom published material provides a substantiated and acknowledged forum for those contributions to be heard (884).

Ultimately, I would argue that ethical concerns such as these are not a reason to eschew custom publishing. To the contrary, they are precisely the reason why we as WPAs should become active in this process. As the survey responses make clear, custom publishing is a growing business. If we do not participate in the process (and act to shape it through that participation) then the ethical questions cannot be resolved and indeed will be resolved for us.

ON ADVANTAGES

Despite such ethical concerns, custom publishing offers WPAs practical advantages beyond the potential for agency in relation to the field of composition textbooks. Indeed part of my interest in this topic comes from my own experience with the process. At my current institution, Florida Atlantic University (FAU), every one of the standard books we use for our FYC sequence is a custom publication, and each of these texts suggests additional advantages to custom publication. Each also represents a different *kind* of custom publishing.

For example, the handbook we use in these courses is a custom edition created by removing sections of a national text that are inconsistent with our pedagogical approach (primarily regarding the writing process). In choosing a custom option we were thus able to create a textbook fully compatible with our theoretical approaches to teaching writing—precisely the option that the majority of the critical literature finds missing. Moreover, because we were removing content (a fairly simple rebinding process for the publisher) we were able to lower costs, providing just the textbook we

needed at a lower cost for students. The resulting text has only the material we want at a price that saves students money.

Our supplemental text represents a different kind of custom publishing, since it consists of solely original material. We had several motives in creating this text, motives which illustrate our stand on some of the ethics involved in custom's relation to peer review. First, given that GTAs and non-tenure track faculty comprise the majority of the teaching population for writing courses at FAU, we wanted a way to preserve the best classroom practices of our instructors who often move on to PhD programs or other jobs; we wanted a way to preserve (and validate) lore. By offering a place for these teachers to publish their class materials we also created an avenue for them to substantiate their teaching work on their curriculum vitae. The book has peer revision sheets, classroom exercises, and information on the common problems in our courses—all of which reflect the theoretical underpinnings of our program. By packaging all of these materials in a textbook we were also able to lower photocopying costs in our department, a serious concern in these lean budget times. Since the text is all original material, we are able to keep costs to students low (around twenty-five dollars for a text they can use both semesters of our FYC) while also generating a small royalty of five dollars used by the program to support our computer classrooms, which our college is unable to fund regularly. Any monies earned from the project, then, go directly into supporting the students with access to technology.

While we have never hidden the existence of this royalty, as a program we are currently moving towards greater transparency about not only this royalty but also our stance on textbook pricing in general. Starting in the fall of 2010, we will be making available to all students a web page with information about textbook prices. These FAQs, located at <http://www.fau.edu/english/writingprogram>, will document our efforts to lower textbook prices, will offer our rationale for the textbooks we use in our FYC courses, and will inform students of what royalties are generated and how those monies are spent.

Our main textbook, *Emerging*, is a custom published composition reader, replacing a nationally published reader that had been used in the program for years. In the course of making this custom text, several publishers expressed interest in a national edition, issued in 2010. As with our other texts, we chose custom publishing to create the exact textbook we needed. But using a custom text offered an additional advantage in terms of moving the book to a national market: class testing. As the proposal for the national text moved through the processes of review—the very processes that Miles identifies as potentially conservative—the fact that our

approach had proven successful in the classroom offered additional incentive for national publication.

Given that this text is nationally published, *Emerging* is a particularly interesting example in light of the larger issues surrounding textbook publication. The ability for a text to move from custom publication to a national edition represents, I believe, the greatest possibility for changing the composition textbook market. After all, custom textbooks risk keeping change localized: theoretically informed textbooks used in a single program or course cannot alter the overall landscape of the national market. But if innovative textbooks can start as custom publications and through that prove their success in the classroom and then move to national publication, the field as a whole begins to change. That process—testing and developing a national textbook through custom publication—has already been used for other textbooks. For example, while working in the writing program at Rutgers University, I assisted Kurt Spellmeyer and Richard E. Miller as they developed the *New Humanities Reader* through the same process.

Of course my goal in working on *Emerging* was not necessarily to produce a national textbook but, more simply, to meet the needs of the writing program at FAU. Thus in sharing my experience I do not necessarily intend to advocate this text as a solution for other writing programs; following the line of my argument suggests instead that other programs should select (or create through custom) a text tailored to their own needs, which is precisely what *Emerging* represents for our program. This ability to tailor content to a program was the most cited advantage of custom publishing in the survey responses. But it was not the only one. Several respondents also noted the possibility that students would only have to buy the content that would be used in the course, which creates the potential for cost savings and, as one respondent noted, made it more likely that students would actually buy the text for the class (Editor, Imagine, Pepmiller). The other major advantage mentioned in the survey was the ability to change material quickly—perhaps even semester to semester. Pepmiller summarizes the advantages of custom publishing:

[U]se only the content you plan to teach; students pay for only content their instructor will require; ability to structure content to meet an instructor's individual approach and the ability to change content from semester to semester to meet changing needs in a discipline or allow an instructor to modify his/her approach and material.

Not only does custom offer a site for creating change but it also offers immediate advantages for WPAs and for students.

These advantages can extend beyond WPAs to teachers themselves. Several publishers offer database-driven custom textbooks, which allow individual instructors to craft their own texts (and even include their own materials), with small minimum orders appropriate for individual writing classrooms.

ON LIMITATIONS

Custom publishing is not without its risks and disadvantages. To understand these it might be best first to consider the complex economic relationships involved in textbook publication. As noted before, textbooks represent an odd product in terms of economic systems since WPAs are not the market for textbooks—students are the ones who actually purchase the text. And yet students do not have the same options as most consumers, because they cannot choose which textbook they would like to use and often cannot shop for the best price. That economic relationship is further complicated by campus bookstores, which serve as another intermediary in the transaction (beyond publishers), often with a significant mark-up in price.

Each of these agents—WPAs, students, bookstores, and publishers—can have different reactions to custom textbooks. Publishers like custom texts because they guarantee that students will be buying the text from the bookstore (and hence the publisher) rather than from various online sites that offer used or instructor copies at significant discounts. While bookstores might also enjoy this monopoly, they tend to dislike custom texts because of the stringent return policies mandated by many publishers. For national texts, leftover stock can easily be returned to the publisher or shifted to other stores on other campuses that use the same text; with a custom text, however, bookstores can be stuck with remaining copies that do not sell. For students, custom texts are also a tricky issue. On the one hand, these texts can cost quite a bit less than full national texts, but there is no guarantee. Particularly with collections of readings, the complex economics of permissions can increase the cost of the text. Moreover, students won't be able to shop around for the best price, and they may not be able to sell back the book to the bookstore at the end of the term.

There are unique logistical problems possible as well. For example, in the fall of 2009 the truck delivering the custom edition of *Emerging* to our campus bookstore was involved in an accident and caught fire, destroying all of the texts. The publisher had to scramble to reprint these texts before the start of the semester. Had we been using a nationally published textbook, of course, reprinting would not have been necessary; new texts could have been quickly shipped from existing stock. We experienced a similar

problem with our custom handbook that fall. The text on which our custom version was based had moved to a new edition. The remaining stock of the older edition was not sufficient to produce the custom texts we needed, causing complicated solutions to this pressing problem. And, while we have not experienced logistical problems with our supplemental textbook, the fact that it consists of wholly original material demands a significant amount of time and work when updating the text for a new edition. None of these problems are insurmountable, yet all of them require close and committed work on the part of WPAs and publishers. The sense of partnership expressed by the survey respondents is particularly important, since resolving such problems relies upon (and sometimes challenges) the working relationships formed between WPAs and publishers.

The ability for WPAs to add a royalty to a custom textbook also creates special complications and unique risks. At FAU, we had to complete conflict of interest paperwork because we were requiring students to purchase texts that we ourselves had written. Our institution did not object to our supplemental text, even though we received a royalty for the program from all sales. Other writing programs, however, have not been as fortunate. In July of 2008, for example, *The Wall Street Journal* printed an article about the custom textbook used at the University of Alabama, which added some custom material into a national edition handbook. The opening of the article reflects its general tenor:

College students, already struggling with soaring tuition bills and expenses, are encountering yet another financial hit: Publishers and schools are working together to produce “custom” textbooks that can limit students’ use of the money-saving trade in used books. And in a controversial twist, some academic departments are sharing in the profits from these texts. (Hechinger)

Any custom project that includes royalties, then, opens the risk for backlash, particularly given the increasing concern among students and legislatures about the costs of textbooks.

Even when royalties are not involved, custom textbooks can present challenges for writing programs. Consensus is essential in deciding what goes into (or comes out of) a custom published textbook, but as anyone who has served on a committee can tell you, consensus is often a difficult goal to achieve, perhaps particularly when it comes to deciding what to include in a textbook to be used across an entire program. Moreover, if consensus can indeed be reached it may also in turn generate a new kind of inertia. Christine Ross, for example, found just such inertia in her examination of

the collaborative revision of the textbook for the writing program at University of California at Irvine. What began there as a radical revision driven by process-based pedagogies became far more conventional over time (306).

Many of these complications are compounded when individual teachers seek to use custom options. Without the economies of scale provided by program-wide adoptions, teachers may be limited to selections already included in the publisher's database, which often reflects customary approaches to writing and thus which also blunts the more radical potentials of custom publishing. More practically, the bookstore may not order enough texts. In our program, some of our teachers who attempted such class-specific custom texts found that the bookstore would order only a handful of copies for a class of thirty-five students. The economies of scale that allow for new and different readings and materials to appear in a custom text also persuade campus bookstores to order sufficient copies.

Far more practically I can say from experience that custom textbooks can be a lot of work—work that has to be repeated with each new edition. Given the amount of labor it takes to run any writing program, the additional work of crafting a textbook may serve as a powerful disincentive to creating a custom text. At the low end of the work spectrum, when only removing content not needed in a national edition, questions of royalties, covers, contracts, and pricing remain. At the high end, writing a fully custom text involves all the work involved in writing any text. When such work happens collaboratively, questions of attribution and intellectual property can come into play. Moreover, the impact of any such work on a tenure portfolio is often negligible, since custom texts are of course not peer reviewed.

Each of these challenges is primarily local, as are the texts themselves. But in terms of the larger argument I am pursuing here the problem might be more subtle. After all, to act as a site of change, custom publishing needs to be able to alter the larger landscape of composition textbooks. Some custom text options—those driven by databases of readings, for example—offer little potential for change, since any constructed collection of readings will be subject to the same conservative processes of market construction as any traditional textbook. And while readers such as *Emerging* and the *New Humanities Reader* suggest a possibility for change (because each moved from custom to national editions), using custom publishing to speak back to the larger market comes with its own attendant set of problems. In “Writing *Writing Lives*: The Collaborative Production of a Composition Text in a Large First-Year Writing Program,” Sara Garnes et al reflect on this same movement from custom to national edition represented by the publication of *Writing Lives*. In addition to problems with attribution,

intellectual property, and profit they note problems seemingly inherent to the genre of the textbook itself:

It was in preparing the manuscript to meet this deadline that we first encountered the force of the traditions of the textbook genre. These traditions were made explicit as we soon had to decide which parts of our curriculum we would defend to the end and which parts we would mold into new shapes. We held our ground resisting mode-based formal writing assignments while agreeing to modify prompts in significant other ways. We compromised on discussion questions and informal writing assignments, changed titles of sections and added explanations, readings, and accompanying apparatus in which we repeatedly explained our views and reasoning. (257)

When the innovative custom text meets the national market the conservative forces of traditional textbook publishing come into play, skewing the impact of that innovation. My own experience confirms this tension, as I had to work closely with my editor to negotiate between my vision for *Emerging* and the needs of a national audience.

ON CONCLUSIONS

As a whole these disadvantages no doubt give pause to any WPA considering an entry into the waters of custom publishing—and so they should. Yet my argument is not that custom publishing resolves the tensions knotted around publishing—between tradition and innovation, between WPAs and publishers, between the field and the market. Rather, despite and because of the limitations of custom publishing, it remains an important location for agency. By conscientiously engaging with this practice, we can perhaps minimize its disadvantages while strengthening its abilities to create democratically and pedagogically informed texts. These local benefits—for a school, for a program, for a class—might then in turn shift the larger landscape of composition textbooks in part by intervening in some of the processes that publishers use to construct the market.

“Custom” itself, as I suggested in opening this essay, embodies many of the tensions involved in textbook publishing. Our challenge as WPAs is to shape the meaning of that word in relation to publishing and in doing so to continue the work that Miles first called us to do. I believe *Writing Lives* provides an example of what that might mean. That text began as a collaborative and local solution to the problems of a particular program, a dissatisfaction with what was *customary* in the field. In *customizing* a textbook, the authors sought very modest goals, such as having “a book, rather

than a haphazard collection of photocopied material” (253). In moving to a national edition the text moved through a sort of *customs* department, where the shape and content had to be negotiated (and regulated). Once published, WPA *customers* could offer that text—and, more importantly, its pedagogy—their *custom*. And thus a *customized* approach to teaching writing was able to make a difference in the larger field of textbook publishing.

But allow me also to return more directly to the many definitions of “custom.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there is yet another dimension to “custom,” though now considered archaic. “Custom” is also a verb, and when it functions as such, it can mean “To bestow one’s custom on; to deal with (a person) or at (a shop); to frequent as a customer.” I’d like to suggest we resurrect this verb, if only metaphorically, for it reminds us that custom itself is an action we take, is something we can and should do. Where shall we bestow our custom? How shall we deal with the many kinds of individuals involved? If we are always already customers, where shall we frequent? I hope I’ve suggested some new answers to these questions, for custom publishing demands our attention now. As the survey responses suggest, the practice is transforming the textbook publishing industry. If we fail to recognize and realize our ability to act in relation to custom textbook publishing (if we fail to custom it) then it’s possible that old and familiar patterns will persist in this new publishing model. It’s time to change our custom, our accepted ways of acting. It’s time to customize our custom instead.

NOTES

1. That there are only four major composition textbook publishers remaining (Bedford St. Martin’s, Cengage, McGraw Hill, and Pearson) reflects the continued conglomeration of the industry noted by critics like Mortensen, represented most recently by the merger of Wadsworth and Houghton Mifflin into Cengage.

2. Precise sales figures for custom published composition textbooks are not available. However, survey respondent Chris Englert indicated that custom publishing represented 30% of her company’s business. And according to a 2008 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, custom textbooks represented 12% of total sales for all textbooks across the disciplines, with an annual growth rate of 15% (Hechinger).

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APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What name would you like me to use when quoting your responses in the article?
2. What is your current job title?
3. Please explain briefly what you do in your job and how it fits into the publication process.
4. How long have you worked in publishing?
5. What experience with custom publishing have you had in your job?
6. How has custom publishing changed your job?
7. What would you say are the advantages of custom publishing for a writing program?
8. What would you say are the disadvantages of custom publishing for a writing program?
9. What role do you expect custom publishing to play in your job in the future?
10. How would you describe the company you work for? How does it imagine or represent itself?
11. What role does custom publishing play in your company's business?
12. How has the role of custom publishing changed within your company?
13. About how long has your company been doing custom publishing?
14. What do you see as the future of custom publishing within your company?
15. How would you describe the current relationship between publishers and writing programs?
16. In what ways, if any, would you say that custom publishing has changed the relationship between publishers and writing programs?
17. Some scholars in Rhetoric and Composition have argued that publishing is inherently conservative and disconnected from developments in composition theory, resulting in the same old books again and again. How would you respond?
18. In her 2000 article "Constructing Composition" Libby Miles responds to those compositionists by arguing that the uniformity of available texts and resistance to change is in part a result of the conservatism of Composition and Rhetoric, exercised through consultants and reviews. How would you respond to this statement?
19. How do you think custom publishing has impacted the publishing industry?
20. What do you think is the future of publishing?
21. What do you think is the future of custom publishing?
22. Are there any misconceptions you think WPAs might have about publishers that you'd like to clear up?
23. Is there anything else you think I should know about custom publishing?
24. May I contact you if I have any follow-up questions?
25. Would you like to read the draft of this article before it's submitted for publication?

If you answered Yes to either of the above questions, please provide an email address where I can contact you.

