A Textbook Solution

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The most complicated form in print media is the textbook," Josh Koppel of ScrollMotion explained to me. "You have a 1,000-page math text with 10,000 more pages of homework assignments. You've got the graphic side, the text side, notation, assessment, remediation. And we need to make this all live well digitally without being subtractive."

Tom Rowe

Early this year, a consortium of educational publishers, including McGraw-Hill; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; and Kaplan, signed up with ScrollMotion to produce their products for the iPad. In trying to nail the tablet-computer design, Koppel has papered his office wall with old baseball cards, tears from Montgomery Ward and Sears catalogs (1880s and 1960s), a military edition of Thomas Beer's "Mauve Decade," the final issue of Weekly World News — the most inspired text and graphic solutions from years past. He says his fear, as we shift from analog to digital textbooks, is that some content — and with it some culture — will fall by the wayside. "This is what we have to fight: 'Oh, we lost another thing!' " Koppel says. "Pretty soon nobody even knows we've lost it."

One aspect of the print-to-pixels conversion seems clear: the second coming of the textbook will not be arriving on a Kindle. Last year, Amazon conducted trials of its Kindle DX at seven universities. Undergraduates at Princeton called the Kindle DX "a poor excuse of an academic tool." Students at the University of Virginia deemed it clunky and slow. Even the graduate students in computer science and engineering at the University of Washington hated the Kindle for class work.

E-reading experts like Evan Schnittman, a managing director at Bloomsbury Publishing, found this no surprise. Schnittman breaks down reading into three kinds: extractive reading (say, looking up words in the dictionary), immersive reading (sinking into "Moby-Dick") and pedagogic reading (studying a physics curriculum). The first type is well suited to the search capacities of digital devices. The second works beautifully on e-ink readers. The third? So far it has failed in all electronic formats, awaiting the right hardware — the so-called form factor. Schnittman says the solution might be in tablets like the iPad. He even says that Apple purpose-built the iPad as an educational device. "It's the educational wolf in sheep's clothing," he told me. Students will buy one for entertainment, then realize it's the perfect reader. "It finally hit me a few months ago," he said. "This is why Apple's app store is squeaky clean and we're seeing Steve Jobs attack the Android for porn