

3Qs: An Apple for the teacher - and student

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Matthew Gray, an assistant professor in the College of Arts, Media and Design, discusses how Apple's new iBooks2 and iBooks Author platforms could transform education and teaching at every level. Photo by Christopher Huang.

Last week Apple announced two new eReader platforms – iBooks and iAuthor – that the electronics giant hopes will modernize learning and “reinvent textbooks.” Northeastern University news office asked Matthew Gray, an assistant professor of theater in the College of Arts, Media and Design, who was recently quoted in ArsTechnica about Apple's foray into textbooks, to comment on the new software and how it will change the face of education as we know it.

What is the goal of Apple's new eReader platforms and how do they differ from other ebooks?

[Apple's](#) iBooks 2 aims to expand the referential abilities of traditional ebooks. For example, users could click on Shakespeare's name while

reading a book about Elizabeth 1st and be linked to a whole host of additional content — videos about the Bard’s life and plays, online picture galleries of his house or musical clips from songs used in his plays. iBooks 2 can also reference itself, directing users to relevant content within the text. Since ebooks take up very little memory, iBooks 2 would also act as a mobile library, enabling [students](#) to carry their entire textbook collection with them.

iBooks Author is Apple’s free application for users to write and create their own ebooks. Just as ‘GarageBand’ turned (potentially) everybody into a recording artist, iBooks Author has the potential to turn all writers into circulated authors. If a writer can code in javascript and html, he could create personalized ‘widgets’ for his ebooks, harnessing the massive potential for connectivity. Additionally, students can construct their textbooks from information in class and professors can turn a syllabus into a book accessible to students at other institutions.

What are some of the ways this technology could affect students in the future?

Students could certainly reap rewards from this development. It will, however, only become a sustainable educational tool if hardware costs are dealt with swiftly and comprehensively. This has led some to speculate that Apple (and other hardware developers like Amazon’s Kindle platform) may market a device specifically for students, which would be cheaper and could be controlled by a teacher’s device.

Prices of textbooks will have to change one way or another, and that will impact how student loans can be distributed. Students will have less to carry to class (a point Apple emphasized in its announcement earlier this week), and will be able to gain access to information and material faster via the Internet. It remains to be seen how this would affect college

bookstores.

Most importantly, 'surfing the internet' will become an increased threat to students' learning. Technology like this actually places greater responsibility on the student to focus on what the task at hand may be. Retaining and reciting knowledge will become less of a marker of intelligence and ability, but instead a kind of 'tool' that may, or may not, be useful.

How will this technology affect professors and universities at large?

A professor's syllabus and curriculum could soon become entirely open-source and even link to similar curricula at other universities, placing increased emphasis on professors to remain current and relevant, if only in syllabus 'design.' This also means that the role of professors could change, affecting their relationships with students. Since eBooks provide access to massive amounts of information in many different formats, students will drive their own learning. So rather than professors being the 'possessors of knowledge,' they will assist student in analyzing information and deciding what to pay attention to. Testing that data and investigating hypotheses will become more important, increasing the value of laboratory, studio and performance spaces, despite the idea that eBooks could undermine the need for classroom space.

This also potentially expands the importance of interdisciplinary projects. The strength of this technology lies in how many links it can make and how it can present one idea in many different forms, helping learners of many different levels and learning styles. Universities have been derided as harbingers of an outdated form of education where knowledge is turned into disciplines that are disconnected from all others around them.

eTextbooks, however, foster inter-connectivity, so this may impel more universities to emphasize interdisciplinary work.

Finally, there is the specter of corporate advertising on campus. There are potential upsides to this — perhaps, for example, Apple will train professors to code in javascript/html in exchange for us using their devices in the classroom. The downsides could be logos or ads in the classroom and personalized advertising for students on their reading devices.

It is certain, however, that things will change. We can make that change a positive one if we begin to prepare now.

Provided by Northeastern University

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