

From textbook to flexbook: Professor uses new collaborative tool in the classroom

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(Phys.org) -- A Kansas State University professor is gaining attention for creating a textbook replacement that saves students money and provides instructors with teaching flexibility.

Brian Lindshield, assistant professor of human nutrition, has developed an online form of textbook called a flexbook. His flexbook is one of three nominees for an Education-Portal.com People's Choice Award for "Most Open Resource."

Instead of buying a textbook, [students](#) in Lindshield's human nutrition course use a flexbook titled "Kansas State University Human Nutrition (HN 400) Flexbook," which is free for students to use. A flexbook is an open collaborative platform for open course materials. Lindshield created the flexbook to help students save money on [course materials](#) and to help students and instructors gain access to rapidly changing information.

"I believe the courses that can most benefit from a flexbook are the lower-level, high enrollment, textbook utilizing courses," Lindshield said. "The content in these courses is more general, and there are likely resources and material available that can be used to make an open educational resource for them."

Lindshield teaches more than 100 on-campus students every spring semester and approximately 45 online students in his [human nutrition](#) course each semester. He used a wiki the first time he taught the course

in 2009. After feedback from students, Lindshield developed the flexbook in [Google](#) Docs to share with his students.

Because flexbooks are designed to be read online, they contain links to videos, animations, relevant news stories, websites and other online material, Lindshield said. A flexbook is designed to have more figures and visuals than huge amounts of text.

To meet students' various learning styles, Lindshield created four ways to share the flexbook with his students: through [Google Docs](#), a Web link, a PDF posted on K-State Online or a print copy that students could either get from a copy center or print themselves. Students do not have to choose only one of the four ways, and the majority of them access the flexbook in multiple ways, Lindshield said. The hard copy of the flexbook is the least-used version.

In addition to saving students textbook costs, flexbooks have learning advantages. Lindshield said that students create "flexnotes," where they take the flexbook and add comments and notes from class. Flexbooks also help instructors because it is a living, evolving resource that can be easily updated.

"There are times students have told me they didn't understand a certain concept in the flexbook," Lindshield said. "I have been able to make changes and get their feedback so that it's clear to them and future students. As an instructor, making and updating the flexbook continues to make me reflect on everything that I include in the course."

Flexbooks also provide instructors with collaborative opportunities. Lindshield's flexbook is being used for a course at Merrimack College in Massachusetts, where an instructor is using the flexbook and other resources to replace a previously used textbook.

"Instructors can customize flexbooks to match what they teach," Lindshield said. "The collaborative nature of flexbooks means that instructors of similar courses or members of professional societies can work together to make a base flexbook, then each instructor can make a customized flexbook off of that for their course."

Lindshield spent hundreds of hours creating the flexbook, but he was also developing the course at the same time. Lindshield noted that keeping the flexbook updated requires minimal effort because he usually updates the flexbook as he is preparing to teach class. He continues to refine the content, organization and look of the book.

Lindshield has conducted student surveys with his on-campus and online students to obtain their feedback and find ways to improve the flexbook. He has received positive reviews. In the survey, the majority of students said they preferred the flexbook to buying a traditional textbook because they appreciate the affordability, flexibility and features of the flexbook. Online students did use the flexbook more than on-campus students and the online students reported using the online components -- such as videos and animations -- more.

Lindshield encourages interested professors and instructors to try flexbooks in their courses and he suggests collaborating and obtaining student input when making a flexbook.

"Given the time involved, it was important for me to have a vision for what the ultimate goal was going to be and to take satisfaction in the small steps I was completing toward that goal," Lindshield said.

More information: To view the flexbook through a Web link, visit goo.gl/vOAnR .

Provided by Kansas State University

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