The purpose, design, and evolution of online interactive textbooks: the digital learning interactive model

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Main content

ABSTRACT: In deciding how best to meet the challenge of teaching this generation of students, Digital Learning Interactive (DLI) is pioneering online textbooks that go far beyond conventional printed textbooks in delivering information and in drawing the reader into the material as an active, not a passive learner. This article explains the genesis of DLI's approach to higher education in history, the features available in its many different texts, the new capabilities on the horizon, and courseware upcoming in the next year or two.

Three years ago Dr. Robert Fisher, president of Digital Learning Interactive and then a professor of modern European history at Harvard University, was sitting in a publisher's office listening to an executive describe the extraordinary attributes of that company's Western Civilization textbook. In the course of his presentation, this gentleman stated that the textbook could relate to the needs of every student in the class. Robert Fisher found this idea ludicrous. Students have diverse interests, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds. How could any one textbook address all of these factors?

The standard modern survey textbook reflects the views of one or more experts who frame their knowledge in a form fixed in time and space that defines what others are to learn and how they are to learn it. As every instructor knows, textbooks reflect the bias and approach of the authors, and limit in some manner every instructor who adopts it to that particular approach and organization of the material. Most instructors use textbooks as supplements to their lectures and very often the relationship between what the student reads and hears in class is not clear. Indeed, a teacher often disagrees with the textbook and has to decide (1) whether to assign those passages and explain to the class the basis for that disagreement, (2) not to assign them at all, and try to ensure that the students obtain the necessary information in class, (3) ignore the disagreement altogether because they figure students will not notice or care, or (4) hope students will notice and ask about the discrepancy.

This is a flawed approach for several reasons. First, no single author has a monopoly on an approach or an interpretation of a topic. Second, not all students at all schools and at all levels learn in the same way. In fact over the past twenty years more students have developed into visual learners for whom the traditional textbook is increasingly irrelevant. Finally, individual instructors know their own students the best. Until now if the textbook did not suit the needs of their students, instructors were often forced to assign multiple supplementary texts at a prohibitively high cost to the student and/or work assiduously to produce their own material to compensate for the textbook's deficiencies. Instructors found this level of effort was needed to be certain that concepts were explained or understood the way they wished their students to learn them.

Today, the Internet provides effective alternatives that address changing student learning patterns and the previously...