Where're the BOOKS?

Drawbacks to online texts pose problems

by Gianni Harvey-Montgomery

Lucy Capt's students in Advanced Placement U.S. History found out the first week of school they would be using online texts to prepare for their test in May.

"It's much harder for me (to learn) without a book," junior Aubrey Medrano said. "I am a visual learner but not in the case that the book is online."

Capt lobbied administration for textbooks and even secured signatures from students who wanted to use real books. Her efforts resulted in 50 extra textbooks from the publishing company, but it was still not enough to address the needs of her 110 students.

This dilemma has played out in classrooms across the district, as the move to online textbooks has students stressed and administrators struggling to find the funds to pay for them.

"Unfortunately, we increasingly find ourselves having limited control over the available textbook formats for our students," superintendent Andrew Kim said. "On one hand, the major textbook publishing companies are pushing online textbooks as the 'way of the future.'

"However, I'm concerned that the evolution to online textbooks may be moving too quickly without taking into consideration students' learning styles and the ability to have continual access to the technology needed to access them."
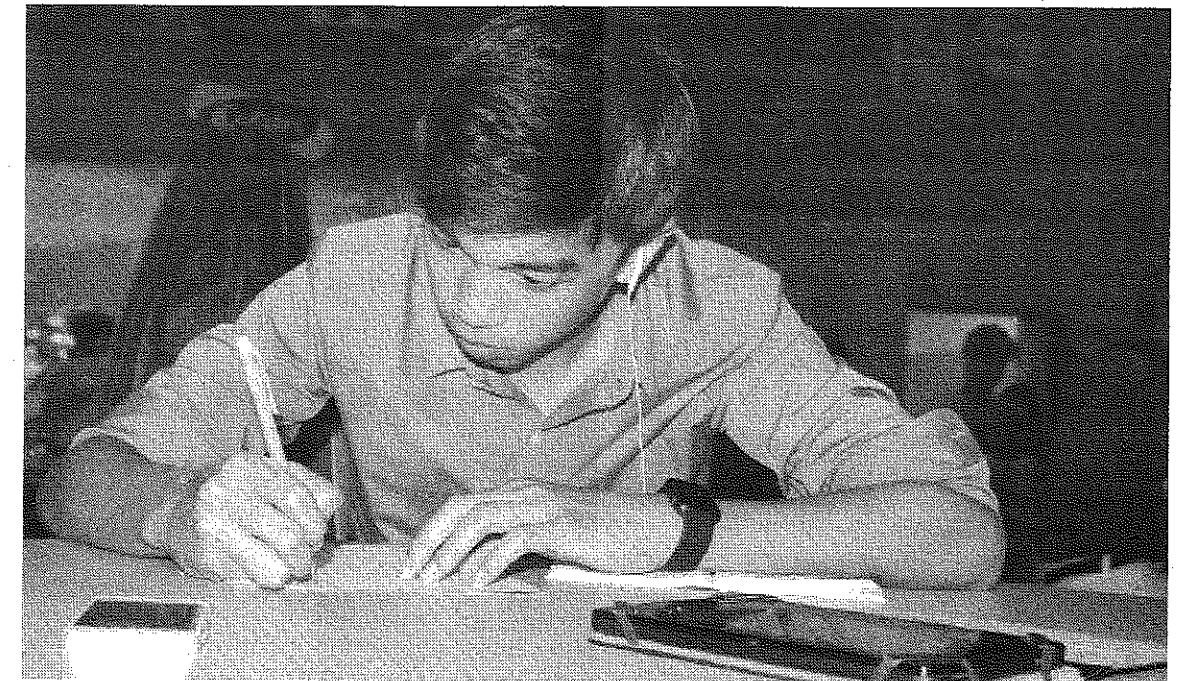
Capt shares these concerns.

"Research shows that people read slower, less accurately and less comprehensively when reading from an online textbook than from a paper book," Capt said. "The tactile experiences of reading on paper somehow improves comprehension and retention. Physical books are better for learning."

Nancie Atwell, founder of the Center for Teaching and Learning, lobbies in support of physical books over the latest technology.

"Multiple studies have documented the impact of classroom libraries: there are more books in the classrooms of high-achieving schools, and more students who read frequently," Atwell said. "As reading researcher Richard Allington put it, 'If I were working in a high-poverty school and had to choose between spending $15,000 each year on more books for classrooms and libraries, or on one more (teaching assistant), I would opt for the books.... Children from lower-income homes especially need rich and extensive collections of books in their school.'"

Naomi S. Baron, an American University linguist who studies digital communication, examined university students' preferences for print and explains why it is often considered superior to digital.

In her surveys, Baron writes that she found "jaw-dropping" results to the question of whether students were more likely to multi-task in hard copy versus reading on-screen. She found that 99 percent of students using a physical book could focus on the task at hand, while only 10 percent of digital users could maintain focus for any period of time.

Even with the problems students face with online textbooks, the district finds the cost for online textbooks driving a book transfer.

"It's significantly less costly to go with the online option," assistant principal Dean Hofer said. "This way, we only have to pay one big cost at the beginning of the year for certain classes."

English Anguish: Sophomore Antonio Mendoza writes an essay on *Lord of the Flies* while referring to the digital book on his tablet.

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The school's initial decision to dip its feet into the digital realm was a decision made with cost and efficiency as its highest standard.

"A class set of 30 print textbooks currently runs on average $2,450.40," Instructional Materials Coordinator Sandy James said. "A class set of 30 digital textbooks currently runs on average $1,737.00."

Although online textbooks have benefits, Hofer has received countless complaints against the change. In a survey of 146 students on campus, 84 percent responded they preferred physical textbooks over online copies.

Baron found similar results in her studies.

"For the past five years, I've been examining the pros and cons of reading on-screen versus in print," Baron said in an online article in *The Chronicle*. "The bottom line is that, while digital devices may be fine for reading that we don't intend to muse over or reread, text that requires what's been called 'deep reading' is nearly always better done in print."