The Textbook as Technology in the Age of Open Education Resources

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At the 2018 meeting of the American Historical Association, The University of Chicago Press launched the inaugural edition of Building the American Republic, the publisher’s new textbook authored by Harry L. Watson and Jane Dailey. The book is published using an emerging model in textbook publishing, in which the digital edition of the text is entirely free to download as an e-book, while the print edition of each half of the two-volume series is available for $30—a bargain in a marketplace where the average cost of a new textbook is well over $100.1 Watson, Dailey, and The University of Chicago Press are entering an emerging textbook market where editors, authors, and publishers are working toward making open education resources (OER) the norm.2 They are not the first historians to dedicate themselves to creating a new, free, and innovative resource. While Ph.D. candidates at Rice University in 2013, Joseph Locke and Benjamin Wright started work on The American Yawp, “a free and online, collaboratively built, open American history textbook designed for college-level history courses.”3 They “sought to embrace new models for the creation and distribution of textbooks” and construct an online textbook they felt best addressed history
students’ academic and financial needs in the traditional survey course. Their mission was to “provide a…truly open resource for students and educators” and “use collaboration and institution-free spaces to create a ‘living’ resource that can ultimately expand the pedagogical horizons of traditional textbooks.” The resulting digital textbook is a modern digital humanities marvel, the result of extensive collaboration between over 450 historians—graduate students, junior scholars, and esteemed historians who serve as editorial consultants and authors. This year, Stanford University Press offers a print edition of the book for $24.95, in addition to the existing free online edition. The American Yawp and Building the American Republic join an existing OER space that is becoming more crowded each year. Rice University’s OER service OpenStax, and the State University of New York system’s Open SUNY Textbooks service, already provide a wide array of offerings spanning many disciplines.

Much of the discourse surrounding these new resources has focused on one of the central issues facing college students today—the high cost of textbooks. Rightfully, these OER textbooks have been positioned as a potential solution to this problem, but the critical literature assessing the value of these resources is still nascent. This essay is an attempt at providing some historical context for the discussion, framing the textbook of the twentieth and early twenty-first century as what I am calling a pedagogical technology, and the precursor to the OER textbook movement. This context reveals that perhaps the resources being created by the movement are not wholly modern pedagogical technologies, despite their place in the digital humanities space.

One key point is unavoidable—the use of these resources is on the rise. In the fall of 2017, The American Yawp attracted over two million page views from three hundred thousand unique users. Building the American Republic, still in the early months of existence, has not yet released adoption numbers, but it stands to reason that many instructors will adopt a peer-reviewed text from a university press that alleviates the students’ financial burden of purchasing textbooks. As these adoptions continue to become widespread, it is essential for historians in undergraduate classrooms to consider whether or not the books are suitable for today’s history survey course. It is my contention that despite making use of modern technology, these books are not yet fully developed. What Locke,
Wright, Watson, and Dailey have created with these texts resembles the American history textbook of the mid-twentieth century in both form and content, rather than a more modern pedagogical technology.

The traditional textbook was perhaps the most ubiquitous instructional tool used in history classrooms during the twentieth century, and it was heavily influenced by changes in history education and educational publishing. Historians have frequently studied the textbook in past decades, but scholarship seldom views textbooks as more than mere vessels for historical facts and ideas. Over time, the way these books have conveyed this history has changed drastically, incorporating visual material and changing format and content along the way. This evolution is representative of the textbook’s change as a pedagogical technology—how the textbook exists in form and design for the classroom. Technology allows OER textbooks to exist in their online homes in the twenty-first century, but the content—the very thing that makes them textbooks—needs to be properly historicized within the past century of development.

The American Pageant as Pedagogical Technology

For the purposes of this analysis, I will be using a single textbook, The American Pageant, to illustrate this change. As a seminal exemplar of the form, an assessment of this work is widely applicable to all series of texts published. The book’s coverage of Reconstruction will serve as a representative sample to show the historical development of the modern college-level American history textbook. First published in 1956, the book was authored by Stanford diplomatic historian Thomas A. Bailey, and it has been consistently revised every four to five years up to the present day. David M. Kennedy (Stanford University) and Lizabeth Cohen (Harvard University) are working on the newest revisions of the book. Like The American Yawp and Building the American Republic, it was first designed to serve the college textbook market.

The first edition of The American Pageant (1956) places the textual narrative front-and-center throughout the bulk of its pages. Chapters begin with the customary chapter number and title, followed by an opening quote from Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. The narrative was heavily influenced by the Dunning School’s racially tinged, anti-Radical Reconstruction interpretation of the
years after the Civil War, perhaps unsurprisingly. Bailey, like many mid-century historians, adhered to the views of Williams A. Dunning and his colleagues.¹⁰

When *The American Pageant* is examined as a pedagogical technology beyond the core narrative, there are some distinctive features. In 1956, Bailey and his publisher, D. C. Heath and Company, used an array of illustrations, including engravings and cartoons excerpted from the British magazine *Punch* and Thomas Nast’s features in *Harper’s Weekly*. These visual aids provided the rich contemporary voice Bailey sought to include for the benefit of his readers, particularly the students who were absorbing the narrative and the teachers saddled with the difficult task of holding on to students’ attention. By 1950s standards, these illustrations were an effective pedagogical tool and they served as a selling point for D. C. Heath, which needed to get college faculty to adopt the book. The inaugural edition of *The American Pageant* also contained charts that were produced in-house at D. C. Heath. These charts allowed for a different presentation of the core historical narrative. As an example, Bailey was able to illustrate a basic timeline of Reconstruction policy, from Lincoln’s “ten-percent plan” to Congress’s militarized Reconstruction and accompanying Constitutional amendments. In another chart, the book includes a state-by-state breakdown showing former Confederate states’ readmission to the United States. Maps further augmented the narrative and showed the geographic dynamics of Reconstruction. D. C. Heath illustrators created a map to give readers a sense of the five military districts of the Reconstruction South with the commanding generals listed in corresponding districts. The purchase of “Walrussia” was also illustrated, complete with a walrus drawn to reference the nineteenth-century contemporary sentiment that the United States was duped into purchasing land filled with little more than walruses and frozen landscape.¹¹

Each chapter of *The American Pageant* ended with a listing of “Select Readings,” as was customary in college textbooks. The section represented the most up-to-date historiography for students to consult to learn more about the topics included in the textual narrative. There were visual materials present to provide special features for the reader to consume, and the publishers to market, but the central feature of *The American Pageant* was the textual
narrative and the synthesis of contemporary historiography. All of these elements add up to constitute what the standard textbook was as a pedagogical technology in the 1950s.

When jumping ahead a few decades to 1987 and the eighth edition of *The American Pageant*, which was revised by David Kennedy, there are some distinct changes to the book. Perhaps most immediately striking is the modernized first page of the chapter, which includes updated design work apropos to 1980s textbooks. The updated design was not the only transformation present in Kennedy’s revision. *The American Pageant* moved away from the Dunning School interpretations and incorporated new scholarship, including work from James McPherson and the earlier works of Eric Foner. Along with narrative changes came distinct shifts in the visual components of the book, shaping the book as a pedagogical technology. New selections of engravings and cartoons were added to the examples from the first edition of the book. The charts that illustrated Reconstruction timelines were modernized to appeal to the students and educators of the 1980s. The maps were also updated with the same intent. There were, however, also new innovations present in the book that were encouraged by market demand. Primary sources were able to take a more prominent role. Photography was included to portray the devastation in the post-Civil War Southern cities and the families of freed people. Students were able to see real people and scenes, and this represents another way that Kennedy and D. C. Heath attempted to provide a more engaging textbook for the market. Photography also enabled the reproduction of material primary sources, such as a ticket to the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson, allowing a hint of material culture to be integrated alongside the core historical narrative. Taken as a whole, there were significant increases in the quantity of visual content in the 1987 edition of *The American Pageant*. Where the original edition had two charts and two maps, the 1987 edition had three of each. The major growth areas were in other visual aids. The original edition contained five engravings and cartoons. By 1987, that number had doubled to ten. In addition, five photographs were present in the revised edition. In the decades preceding the eighth edition, visual content rose to greater prominence throughout the book. All of this was rather standard for texts created between the 1950s and 1980s.
A new batch of special features accompanied this material and incorporated excerpted written primary sources. Contemporary quotes were highlighted throughout in specifically designed, shaded boxes that were distributed throughout the chapter. Ten of these features were included over the single comparable instance in the first edition. Lastly, and most importantly, a “Varying Viewpoints” section was added to the end of the chapter to outline the major historiographical developments in scholarship on Reconstruction from the early Dunning School up to the revisionist scholarship of the 1980s. In essence, the feature was included to help students understand that historical interpretations do, in fact, change over time, despite the impression that a standard textbook narrative provides.

All of this resulted in a more developed textbook, suitable for the 1980s market. By this time, publishers had the habit of what Randall Miller, co-author of the textbook *Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People*, described as “tak[ing] soundings on what teachers want and need in terms of content, coverage, language level” and “support materials.” The books were “slimmed down, carved up, or configured to match interest and need” in the market. David Trowbridge, author of the customizable textbook, *A History of the United States*, further noted that this is a rather common feature of the modern textbook industry, which has resulted in “so many shaded boxes and oversize images that focusing on the narrative becomes difficult.” Modern publishers are pressured to provide web resources that include “databases of primary sources that instructors can integrate into survey texts” or a digital book that “asks students questions as they read” to “improve reading skills and retention.”

This was evident in the fourteenth edition of *The American Pageant* (2010). As with previous editions, the revision incorporated photographs, charts, and primary sources in the print edition, with accompanying online content. To access this supplementary material, students were directed to the website in the bottom corner of the textbook, and at this designated URL, students found a PDF version of the textbook and an assortment of resources designed to augment their education experience—and the marketability of the textbook itself. A glossary of terms was included to define essential terms. An annotated bibliography was provided to give further detail on the recommended reading list at the end of the chapter. The publisher also produced “Lecture Point,” which is a basic
PowerPoint-style presentation of the material with an explanatory voice-over. In addition to these online tools, there is a greater emphasis on primary source analysis in the textbook, with separate features directed at giving students preparation for the document-based questions, which became popular in the standardized testing environment of the early 2000s American education system. By 2010, *The American Pageant* was being used in both college and high school classrooms. These primary source features were essential for the modern market the publisher was attempting to reach—and served a pedagogical purpose for teachers and students in classrooms across the United States.\(^\text{15}\)

The most recent edition of *The American Pageant* (2016), published by the education giant Cengage, includes an added online feature. MindTap is touted as a “digital learning solution that helps instructors engage and transform today’s students into critical thinkers.” It provides assignments, analytics, and a reader to help teachers “turn cookie cutter into cutting edge, apathy into engagement, and memorizers into higher-level thinkers.”\(^\text{16}\) It is the pedagogical technology—core textbook and supplementary material—created for modern classrooms and market demand. Current pedagogy is highly dependent on online interactivity, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to define the textbook as just a physical book or narrative text with visual aids. Modern textbooks are amalgamations of narrative, visual aids, and special features between two covers and interactive environment online. It is a holistic pedagogical tool that takes many forms.

*The American Yawp and Building the American Republic* as Pedagogical Technology

With that brief overview of the progression of textbook technology finished, we return to *The American Yawp* and *Building the American Republic*, books that were created in the same commercial environment as the most current edition of *The American Pageant*, though with a different mission and construction. Free from the profit motives that editors Locke and Wright intended to avoid, they produced a book, *The American Yawp*, which is distinct in this particular moment in the history of textbooks, one that more closely resembles the earliest editions of *The American Pageant*.
than any modern textbook. Watson, Dailey, and The University of Chicago Press have achieved much the same effect. In the layout, the centrality of the textual narrative is apparent, and within that narrative, the most current historiography is addressed—histories of gender, family, racial violence, and economic development. Primary sources are included in the form of captioned photographs and reproductions of material artifacts, even a few cartoons. *The American Yawp* also makes use of similar charts as *The American Pageant* and includes a list of the most current monographs as “Recommended Readings.”

The trappings of a modern history textbook, despite both OERs being web-based resources, are absent. The pedagogical features that have become a staple of the modern textbook—the primary source analysis features, the key terms, and the shaded boxes—do not take up space in *The American Yawp* nor *Building the American Republic*. Aside from a curated primary source reader that accompanies the core text of *The American Yawp*, there are no supplementary pedagogical materials, no PowerPoint presentations, no annotated bibliographies, nor full glossaries. The primary source reader is distinct, compared to the features *The American Pageant* contained as preparation for document-based questions. Further, the type of primary source reader Locke and Wright have created for *The American Yawp* closely resembles the books created to accompany texts such as *The American Pageant* in the middle of the twentieth century. Indeed, shortly after Bailey created his core text, he and his publisher set out to create a companion primary source reader, *The American Spirit*. The book is comparable to *The American Yawp*’s reader. Both include a preface contextualizing the primary source, followed by the full text of the document. As a pedagogical technology, however, *The American Yawp*’s primary source reader lags behind *The American Spirit*. Where Bailey included “Thought Provokers” and “Further Exploration” sections to aid students and teachers, *The American Yawp* has no such aid for teaching. Without the monetary motivation to provide a competitive, in-demand textbook, these guiding questions are much less essential to “hook” buyers.

None of this analysis suggests that either team of authors for *The American Yawp* or *Building the American Republic* were free from the market forces when they conceived of their respective texts. In fact, the market force they were responding to directly affected their
work. Students did not want to spend hundreds of dollars on history textbooks, so they crafted something that would be freely accessible in digital form and at a modest cost in print for all students and educators. The spaces they carved out in the marketplace, however, and their response to these market forces, allowed them to craft a textbook that was not wholly *modern* in a pedagogical sense, despite it being online with the advantages of twenty-first-century technology.

This difference in mission and divorce from market forces shaping commercial textbooks is evident in *The American Yawp*'s democratic digital identity. In pursuit of creating a “truly open resource,” the editors opted for a “Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International License,” which allows users to “copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format” and “remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.”

Consequently, *The American Yawp* is free from the economic incentive publishers face to provide a freshly developed product to the market each editorial cycle, and subsequent revisions of the core of each for-profit textbook. *Building the American Republic* is more restrictively licensed, but not in a way that increases the profit motives of the press or its authors substantially. The online edition of the text remains free for those who wish to download the book. With profit motives suppressed, the pedagogical technology included in each of these texts is at a different stage of development than contemporary, for-profit textbooks.

This historical perspective on textbook production confronts historians and educators with a series of fundamental questions: How much curricular value do the textbook features created since the 1980s hold? Is it detrimental that these new OER textbooks have foregone these features to date? A natural conclusion may be that professional pedagogy has moved beyond using the textbooks provided by education publishing companies, but this was certainly not true in Daniel Cohen’s 2005 study that revealed “U.S. history instructors appear to take a more pedestrian, by-the-book approach.” The textbook was still the primary tool used in the classroom, providing both the organizational scheme for the semester and the primary readings for each class session, ultimately leading to an exam. *The American Pageant* and its competitors were built for this pedagogical reality. The books and supplementary materials have evolved since 2005, but the core principle of the
market remains. The modern textbook remains consistent with the core organization of the history survey course. This is why both The American Yawp and Building the American Republic are textbooks rather than another form of OER.

This fact presents a significant challenge, which complicates the feasibility of widespread adoption for either The American Yawp or Building the American Republic as each text currently exists in print or online. Similarly, OER textbooks face limitations. The United States history textbooks available through OpenStax provide some additional features, periodically linking to external resources throughout the online edition. OpenStax also provides Instructor Resources on its provided “Supplemental Test Items,” along with that warning that, “while OpenStax has correlated the available questions with our textbook, the test bank is not entirely aligned with the book.” The “Resources for History Teachers” provided is a link to a website curated by the University of Massachusetts Amherst, rather than anything created specifically for the OpenStax book. The book, however, is not yet fully developed for use throughout a semester and does not promise to aid student learning like Cengage’s MindTap. The OpenStax page includes a section on “Partner Resources,” listing partners who “provide additional, low-cost resources” to educators who desire them in the classroom. Many of these partners already have existing relationships with education publishers, including Cengage and McGraw-Hill.22 Clearly, these added features are essential to the success of any textbook on the market—OER or for-profit—to the point that some books have already entered a gray area between the two segments of the market.

There is a good reason for this state of affairs. History education has transformed to the point where a simple, narrative-focused textbook has become outmoded for best pedagogical practice. In his seminal essay, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” Lendol Calder argued the history survey course’s “basic design requires professors and textbooks to pass on essential information about a historical period.”23 Five years later, again in the pages of The Journal of American History’s “Textbooks and Teaching” section, Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker historicized the coverage model as a method that is deeply imbedded in the nature of history of education, constantly in tension with the scholarship of teaching and learning. Sipress and Voelker
proposed an “argument-based model” to move pedagogical practice more in line with the historical profession’s “process of argument and debate in which scholars subject rival claims and perspectives to critical analysis to arrive at deeper understandings of important questions and issues.” This is precisely the type of thinking that Cengage’s MindTap platform promises to generate, no matter how successful the platform is at delivering on these promises. With this in mind, it is difficult to assert that The American Yawp, Building the American Republic, and other OER repositories have done enough to move beyond the coverage model and serve the current needs of historians and educators. A narrative-based text places them firmly in the pedagogical mindset that preceded Calder’s 2006 essay.

Though not a distinctly modern pedagogical technology in its current form, The American Yawp is moving in that direction. In recent revision cycles, the editors started “to broaden the project by incorporating additional media, interactive materials, and pedagogical resources, allowing for a ‘living’ project that engages emerging pedagogical trends.” To this end, at the American Historical Association’s 2017 Annual Meeting in Denver, Colorado, Locke and Wright used a THAT Camp (The Humanities and Technology Camp) to begin work on incorporating “The American Yawp Atlas, a compendium of both static and interactive maps designed for the US history survey” into the textbook. The University Chicago Press, Watson, and Dailey are developing sample course syllabi, a teacher’s guide, and other supplementary material, while also seeking instructor input. Indeed, each project is a work in progress and building toward something larger and a more robust pedagogical resource, but there is quite a way to go until each team realizes their respective textbook’s full potential.

The American Yawp and Building the American Republic have succeeded in returning the history textbook to its scholarly roots, drawing from a tradition in which corporate interests were less overwhelming, though not absent. In a piece for the National Council for Public History, Locke and Wright expressed admiration for Roy Rosenzweig, who in 2006 assessed the possibilities that Wikipedia presented for the historical profession. Rosenzweig believed that “extraordinary freedom and cooperation make Wikipedia the most important application of the principles of the free and open-source software movement to the world of cultural, rather than software,
production.\footnote{The vision that Rosenzweig expressed is one that Locke and Wright have brought to fruition in *The American Yawp*. They have created a space—albeit a meticulously controlled and edited space—where scholars can come together and contribute to a synthesized narrative of American history. University presses are beginning to follow suit. To fully realize the potential for *The American Yawp* to be a powerful, modern pedagogical technology, there is ample work to be done. The textbook is already well into the developmental process that Bailey, Kennedy, Cohen, and publishers achieved over multiple decades. Locke, Wright and their team of collaborators have managed to bring a massive project to fruition in the span of only five years. *The American Yawp* will continue this development with all the possibilities that twenty-first-century technology allows.}

**Conclusion**

In the coming years, the editorial teams will have the ability to integrate cutting-edge digital humanities projects, create supplementary assignments, provide thought provoking questions, and author expository features to advance the book as a pedagogical tool. It is not simply providing a free resource for cash-strapped students. OER offerings have already made another impact. Cengage and Pearson have scrambled to put more affordable, subscription-based offerings on the market. Cengage is offering the entirety of their digital catalog to institutions for a per-student subscription fee of $120 per semester. The package includes materials for seventy disciplines and 675 course areas, and the company is targeting adoption for entire institutions rather than individual courses or instructors.\footnote{It would be a significant reduction in the annual cost for students if they adopted all Cengage books, but this presents some rather profound intra-institutional curricular and adoption challenges that span all departments at any given college or university. If these adoptions go on, there is no telling how quickly pricing will rise. OER textbooks provide historians and educators with a profound opportunity. For the first time, there is a viable alternative to profit-driven, corporate textbooks. These resources are early in their development, but they have been curated with a democratic identity and housed at institutions not motivated by profits. These resources are early in their development, but they have been curated with a democratic identity and housed at institutions not motivated by profits.}
publishers and editors are not seeking the same feedback that for-profit education publishers sought throughout the twentieth century. This feedback will, undoubtedly, shape future revisions of each OER textbook. Historians and educators have the opportunity to take part in this process, sharing what works in their classrooms and what is lacking in each book. Collectively, this process has the potential to shape the future of history education in a way that fulfills a dual mission to make it meaningful for students at a reasonable cost.

Notes


4. Locke and Wright, “A Free and Open Alternative to Traditional History Textbooks.”

5. For more information about these projects, see Rice University’s OpenStax website at <https://www.openstax.org> and the State University of New York’s Open SUNY Textbooks website at <https://www.textbooks.opensuny.org>.


19. “Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0),” Creative Commons, <https://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.


22. For more examples of this, see P. Scott Corbett, Volker Janssen, John M. Lund, Todd Pfannestiel, Sylvie Waskiewicz, and Paul Vickery, *U.S. History* (Houston, TX: OpenStax at Rice University, 2018), <https://openstax.org/details/books/us-history>. The “Resources for History Teachers” link leads to <https://resourcesforhistoryteachers.pbworks.com/w/page/123820173/FrontPage>, an online resource organized by a collaboration of scholars at the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.


The History Teacher is a quarterly journal with informative and inspirational peer-reviewed articles addressing historical and pedagogical issues in primary, secondary, and higher education classrooms. The journal also features reviews of historical monographs, textbooks, films, websites, and other multimedia.

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