Why Aren't My Students Reading: Faculty & Student Research Unveiling the Hidden Curriculum of Course Material Usage

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This reflective essay follows a faculty working group as they attempt to understand barriers to access to course materials through the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Through the workgroup's research and collaboration with students in a problem-based learning course, the workgroup uncovered elements of the hidden curriculum in assumptions regarding course material procurement. The collaboration has served as the foundation for efforts to begin to transform the way that faculty on campus make use of textbooks and course materials in their courses. This transformation should make explicit to faculty that the utilization of course materials for all aspects of the course are often hidden pedagogy and must be made explicit by each instructor.

The American college landscape is growing increasingly diverse (Anderson, 2003). The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) reports that all racial groups saw increases in college enrollment, but Whites saw the smallest increase, and the overall percentage dropped from 82% to 63% in 2008. In the state of Illinois, a substantial majority of underrepresented groups exhibit less college readiness and fewer attend immediately following high school (Gong & Presley, 2006). The site of this reflective essay is a Midwest Regional Campus (MRC) located in the southland of a major metropolitan area and reflects these national growing trends.

MRC operated for most of its 50 years as a finishing school, serving adult transfer students as they pursued baccalaureate and master's degrees. They were commuters, attending courses mostly at night. MRC transitioned to a four-year institution in 2014, serving students of the emerging majority. The emerging majority student is often an undergraduate who is 25 years of age or older, from a racial or ethnic minority, and/or first-generation-to-college (Anderson, 2003; Crissman Ishler, 2005; Ross, 2016). Primary concerns for these students include finding place within the institution (Bose et al., 2020; Wang, 2012), and changing social networks (Goode et al., 2020 Pokorny et al., 2017; Wang, 2014),

At MRC, more than half of the student body are people of color, the majority qualify for PELL Grants, and many are first-generation college students. The emerging majority student is often without financial resources, has a limited professional network and is without guidance upon entering the university environment (Rendon & Hope, 1996). Many of these emerging majority students lack the institutional awareness of the means to be successful in higher education, particularly during their first year. This institutional awareness is often described as the *hidden curriculum*.

Research into the hidden curriculum has explored ways that institutions meant to provide greater access and opportunity may, in fact, reify values and belief systems that oppress rather than liberate (Cotton et al., 2013). The hidden curriculum is more than expectations for students to attend class, arrive on time, complete homework, and buy and read the textbook. Or, put differently, these expectations have a profound impact on our emerging majority students. Anderson (2001) explains three common uses of the term hidden curriculum, one of which is the *unstated* rules necessary for the successful completion of education studies (p. 30; italics in original). Cotton et al. (2013) argue that "only by making the hidden curriculum visible can pedagogic researchers and educators better understand the structures which enable some students to succeed and others to be less successful" (p. 195). Revealing the hidden also allows educators and students to negotiate and transform the hidden curriculum (Anderson, 2001) and is a powerful strategy to students' success. One example of this type of hidden curriculum is the unwritten norm of purchasing and using classroom materials. An additional complication is that practices of text usage may differ among disciplines and may also reflect a discipline's epistemic values (Morrow, 2009). The necessity of access to materials in certain courses may remain unspoken.

Although our university still, at this time, is one of few institutions with a majority-minority population, the struggles with retention and persistence and the drastic population changes mean that most institutions will eventually face many of the same questions and dilemmas so pertinent to us now. This paper provides a reflection on a project that evolved as an informal faculty working group began to assess the depth of our community's "textbook problem." Over the course of the school year, the faculty group gathered additional faculty members and undergraduate classroom participation from a problem-based learning course. This paper outlines the work that this group conducted and the consequent shifts in thinking about the issues of course material access and our students. Specifically, the initial concern appeared to be a problem of access to course materials and the financial barrier. Conclusions revealed, however, that the barriers are diverse, and that faculty might be part of the problem. The true complexity of the problem revealed that a solution would require efforts to transform the university's broader pedagogical culture. The following pages examine the steps necessary to define the problem, and steps taken and planned to alter the discourse on course material usage in individual classrooms and at the institution.

THE PROBLEM AT FIRST GLANCE

One month into the Fall 2017 semester, a student struggling in a public speaking course was having difficulty completing his assignments. Dr. Goode asked to see him in her office. He discussed many obstacles including transportation and family issues and

when asked how he was performing in his other classes, he said he was failing most of them. Together they went down the list of his courses and discussed issues with each one. Dr. Goode found that he hadn't purchased a single text for any of his courses (aside from her course, which used open-source materials). He explained he didn't have money for them. He specifically mentioned the $200 basic mathematics textbook and online access bundle. This course requires students to do nearly daily homework in an online environment. Not having the materials is tantamount to failure. How could this student, who already had obstacles to concentration and performance, possibly pass his courses if he didn't even have his materials?

Despite our university's attempts to keep costs low and to integrate high-impact practices (HIPs) throughout the general education curriculum, our students were not succeeding. Dr. Goode gathered colleagues from across the general education curriculum who were interested in understanding how access to materials influenced student success. The faculty group referred to itself as the textbook workgroup and included faculty in English, biology, mathematics, communication, anthropology, and sociology. The workgroup included professors, many of whom had taught at community colleges or other institutions with populations similar to MRC. However, none were prepared for the level of failure experienced in these classrooms.

The problem—it appeared at first glance—was access. The MRC was not alone in coming to this conclusion. A survey released by the US. PIRG Education Fund found that among 2000 respondents, nearly 65% chose not to purchase costly textbooks. The cost of textbooks has grown 82% in the last decade (Bidwell, 2014). In a statement to U.S. News and World Report (2014, January 28), Nicole Allen, a spokeswoman for the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, stated, "Whether it is doing worse in a course without access to the required textbook or taking longer to reach graduation, it is clear that the issue of textbook costs has evolved from a simple financial concern to a threat to student success." Universities have been looking for alternatives to the traditional model of textbook purchase and some have found success with open educational resources (Straumsheim, 2016).

Researchers at other institutions have studied this problem, often focusing on specific courses or disciplines. For example, Berry et al. (2010) investigated course material usage in finances classes. Both Sikorski et al. (2002) and Clump et al. (2004) examined the use of course materials in psychology classrooms. While these studies provide valuable insights into how students think about using materials in certain courses, they do not provide a picture of course material access for the semester experience.

The workgroup decided to study the magnitude of the problem and the following briefly discusses designs and measures for the purposes of understanding the process used to understand access to materials at the institution. The workgroup gathered survey data from the first-years and sophomores in general education classrooms. The workgroup designed a survey that asked students to list their courses for the semester. After each course, students were asked to indicate how they accessed the material: buy, rent, borrow, free/open-source, or not required. Participants included professors teaching the basic English and public speaking courses and asked for permission to gather data in their classrooms. Professors who agreed handed out the surveys during class and returned them to the researchers. Data were collected during weeks 10-11 at the end of the Fall semester in both the basic English and public speaking courses. A total of 83 first-years and 54 sophomores participated (response rates of 41% and 46% respectively). Re-collection took place in the Spring semester in weeks 6-8 with 69 first-years participating who were enrolled in the second-semester basic English course (43% response rate). A total of 206 responses were collected over the two semesters.

Survey results varied widely among classes, with several courses showing access rates of 100%, while others reported access rates between 70–80%. Over all courses covered by the survey, responses show an average access rate of around 80%. For example, 30% of psychology students did not have any access to materials. They did not purchase, rent or borrow them, and the materials were not available online. Similarly, almost 30% of students in macroeconomics did not have access to materials. However, out of 43 students taking statistics, all but 1 of them had access to materials. Every student surveyed taking biology (typically more costly course materials) had their materials for the course and the associated lab. There did not appear to be a discernible pattern. In courses with materials generally of higher cost, almost all students had the text.

Further, access to materials did not appear to be correlated with success in the course. The group compared access rates to data available from the Office of Institutional Research on Ds, Fs, and withdrawal (D/F/W) rates in those same courses. While an observable trend shows that the D/F/W rates increase as the percentage of students reporting a lack of access increases, there are too many outliers to draw significant conclusions. In particular, in two courses 100% student reported access to materials, but still had D/F/W rates above 50%. Cost alone did not seem to be determining access to materials or course success.

In one of our faculty workgroup discussions, this realization hit home. Members from the humanities and social sciences hoped to mitigate the problem by persuading our colleagues to use open-source materials or to write their own textbooks, a solution that was working well in our classrooms. After proposing the idea, a colleague from biology first looked confused and then flabbergasted. She explained it would take a year, multiple faculty working full time and thousands of dollars to create a local text, and the program would need time for revisions in future years to keep up with research in the field. She went on to state that in her experience, access was not the biggest issue in her classes (as the data would bear out), but that students simply were not relying on the text. She has an additional copy in her office and invited any student without the ability to purchase the text the opportunity to borrow her book and she leaves a copy in the library on reserve.

The survey results and our follow up discussions were informative if only to further problematize the group's sense of the issue. Student success in the classroom and student persistence and retention are not a simple matter of cost. What began as an attempt to solve the "access problem" by persuading others to choose free or open-source materials and to provide data to the university for possible university-wide action, grew into a reframing of the problem.

If cost did not determine access to course materials, what could be causing our students to fail to access the text? Perhaps the answer could be found by viewing the problem through the lens of seeing our students as part of the emerging majority experiencing a hidden curriculum—the "unwritten rules and expecta-

tions" (Jehangir, 2008, p. 34) that are often not made explicit and yet, are essential elements of the university experience. Horn (2003) argues that the hidden curriculum is "a broad category that includes all of the unrecognized and sometimes unintended knowledge, values, and beliefs that are a part of the learning process" (p. 298). One of the elements of the hidden curriculum is the necessity of reading and using course materials to be successful in courses.

Without the guidance or understanding of the importance of access to materials and use of such materials, many emerging majority students may choose to opt out of purchasing or procuring them. Often, emerging majority students enter classrooms without the necessary materials to succeed and without adequate guidance and support to demonstrate why course materials are essential in the first place. The faculty workgroup decided to explore an understanding of the student experience.

SEEING OUR STUDENTS THROUGH THE LENS OF EMERGING MAJORITY

Serendipitously, our faculty workgroup was approached by the Director of First-Year Writing (Dr. Smith) who was teaching a section of our second-semester, first-year writing course: English 1010: Writing Studies 2. Building on theoretical foundations of community-engagement pedagogy and problem-based learning, the course was designed to integrate a service-learning component. Because of the focus on systemic problems, connections to students' lived experiences, and because of its connection to studying literacy, he reached out to us—particularly in relation to the cost of such materials for students and the resulting pressures that it placed on students who would not purchase those materials because of the cost.

Working from Leon and Sura's (2013) premise that collecting data can be more valuable to community partners than written advocacy, the course was built around a series of assignments that scaffolded the collection of qualitative data that could be used to better define students' use of textbooks and the perspectives of the campus community. Students partnering with the workgroup would also benefit from understanding their own positionality as it relates to the issue. The data collected by students could then help to triangulate the quantitative survey data. The ultimate goal for the project was to have students participate in bringing about change that could positively affect them, their friends, and future MRC students.

The course revolved around four projects that were designed to intersect with the course outcomes for Writing Studies 2 and to scaffold the work of analyzing the problem of the cost and selection of textbooks. At strategic times during the semester, members of the working group visited the class to discuss their project, talk about the issue of textbook prices, provide guidance to help direct students' inquiry, and to plan future events advocating for campus-wide change. The culminating project asked students to consider how best to address the problem of textbook use in the context of this MRC.

After getting an understanding of educators' perspectives on textbooks through interviews, students studied the problem from the student point of view, using basic participant-observer methods to learn and explain how the members of student communities interact with textbooks in the context of their educational experience. Students learned some fundamental strategies for practicing participant-observer research and made use of these strategies at different sites on campus where students read or otherwise interacted with course materials: in study groups, the library, specific classes, etc.

At the conclusion of the semester, Dr. Smith reported to the working group a summary of what he had learned from the student essays and conclusions that students had drawn from their own findings. Three major themes emerged—cost, relevance, and perceived misuse by faculty. First, cost emerged as one of the most important barriers to course material purchases. Much of the discussion during the class focused on the notion of cost, particularly what students saw as an unexpected expense.

Second, students were genuinely confused as to why it was necessary to purchase materials. The reasons for this confusion were centered on two factors. For some students, course material purchase made little difference in course success. Students perceived they could achieve a passing grade without buying the required texts. Additionally, students relied heavily on their smartphones as a way to access information, using basic internet searches to help fill in their knowledge gaps. This factor raises the question of the difference between quick reference usage and obtaining knowledge, and it begs the question of how faculty are intending students to make use of their textbooks. At face value it appears that there is a disconnect between the intentions of faculty for assigning readings and the understanding of students for why readings are assigned.

Third, frustration emerged at the perceived misuse of course materials in the classroom. Generally, there was a sense that if a textbook is required, faculty should utilize the textbook either for homework or during class time in essential ways. Instead, the sense was that some faculty provided all content necessary to pass exams during class sessions, rendering textbooks superfluous. This variation in faculty use appears to support the quantitative data gathered earlier, where students reported purchasing math and biology course materials, since those materials were utilized in apparently different ways that made purchase essential to passing the courses. Ultimately, it was clear that the cost of materials is only one element of a decision calculus regarding a course. The teaching style of the instructor, the perceived ability to "pass" without reading, and even what constitutes knowledge are factors students use to determine their purchasing behaviors. In this sense, the students appear to be gaining epistemological access as they determine which text purchases are essential to varying disciplinary norms.

LESSONS LEARNED: HIDDEN CURRICULUM / HIDDEN PEDAGOGY

Although this project grew organically out of the confusion and frustration over course materials access in our classrooms, what emerged from this project taught us as much about ourselves, particularly our teaching, as it did about our students.

The group began with two assumptions, first, that students weren't buying textbooks because they couldn't afford them, and second, that teachers and the institution could solve that problem. In the early stages of our investigation two more assumptions influenced the work: students didn't buy textbooks because they weren't engaged and that their status as emerging majority was the primary cause. As the project developed, however, collaboration with students helped develop four revisions of our assumptions:

Students Choose Not to Buy Textbooks for Complex Reasons

In some situations, students do buy and read textbooks. When discussing textbooks some students describe their decision to buy a textbook as contingent (Senack, 2014). They wait to see if the course will "use" the book, purchasing it only when (and if) it becomes necessary. For them, the importance of textbooks is not hidden at all, but rather is negotiable as they resist this purported value held by their instructors. In the survey results, there was also clearly some confusion on what "text" or "course materials" meant for these students. For example, in some courses, students would report that the text was free and online while others reported that there was no text. These discrepancies, although accounting for a minuscule amount of the data, illustrate yet another additional puzzle: what do students see as "course materials" and what is a "text" to them?

Faculty Need to be Explicit About the Need for Texts

Educators need to intentionally address assumptions about student behavior in institutions and then need to align those expectations with vision (Jerald, 2006). Further, faculty need to frame the problem of textbook acquisition in terms of "academic literacy," understanding that students need to be invited into deeply contextual and disciplinary-specific ways of valuing the reading material assigned in classrooms. (Richardson, 2004). How important are textbooks to our courses if professors use them in limited ways or as quick references to information? How can courses address this importance and make the value relevant to students? How can students be included in this conversation? Answering these questions effectively requires a campus-wide shift in our understanding of the problem of textbook usage and in the pedagogical strategies of instructors.

In addition to the difficulties imposed on emerging majority students by the hidden curriculum, we contend there is a corollary in "hidden pedagogy" as another barrier to students' success. Hidden pedagogy can be defined by those tacit and unstated actions, activities, plans, etc., that faculty use for instructive purposes. Just as the curricular expectations for students remain hidden, so too do our reasons for asking students to participate and work toward particular goals in particular ways. In other words, faculty must unveil disciplinary norms to provide epistemological access to students and support their success, seeing the textbook use generally and reading specifically as a social practice (Lea & Street, 1998). When applied to textbooks, hidden pedagogy attends to the "what" and "why" of buying, accessing, and reading course materials. That is, faculty use textbooks and other reading assignments for purposes that can vary widely based on teaching style and academic discipline and they must work to give "meaning to such practices" (Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2020, p. 328). Yet there is also a tendency for faculty to believe these tacit practices—their reasons for assigning reading—are clear to students and necessary for the objectives of the course. In some instances, neither of these assumptions may be true. Instead of working from a deficit model—what the students lack—faculty need to embrace the unique features of their own communities of practice, helping students to braid together their prior knowledge to construct new ways of knowing in disciplinary settings (Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2020; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Lea, 1998).

The concept of hidden pedagogy reveals to teachers the importance of demystifying the curricular expectations, pedagogical processes, and epistemological expectations used to achieve learning. Teachers must make explicit the assumptions that we blame our students for not knowing. This act of demystification is one that Giroux (1991) identifies as a "central pedagogical task" (p. 53). Teachers' lack of knowledge about their students, especially about emerging majority students, makes teachers unwitting and privileged "professionals," who, Margolis and Romero (1998) argue, have become blind to the personal experience of inequality. Teachers and institutions reinscribe the class and power issues our students encounter with their own blindness to the hidden nature of our own curricular values.

Students Should be Invited into Our Conversations

Further, student collaboration in SoTL offers yet another potential avenue to reveal the true nature of the learning experience. The underserved student rarely has the same opportunities for problem-based, community engagement learning (Najmabadi, 2017) and these students may feel that their ideas and lived experiences have little value (Jehangir, 2008). For the emerging majority student, this type of exercise may be the most meaningful (Rooks & Holliman, 2018). Students in this project learned about themselves and how their actions inside and outside of the classroom influence how professors thought about course materials. Bonney (2018) found that partnerships with students in SoTL can foster agency as students perceive value in their contributions to the learning and research environment. Involvement in SoTL also helps illustrate education as an evolving endeavor situated to the meet the needs of individuals and communities.

Faculty Need to Communicate About Their Own Roles in Creating This Problem

The faculty working group will continue to circulate what was learned as part of this research with the goal of revealing to our campus community both the pedagogy and curriculum that has been hidden, particularly as it pertains to the way we discuss and think about textbooks and reading assignments. This rhetorical activity will take a number of different forms across a variety of venues, in order to reach a larger audience of faculty and to accrete the ideas over time. We encourage others to enact similar strategies within their institutions.

1. Through a report to the General Education Council, to make faculty who set policy and oversee curriculum for general education courses aware of what the research shows about textbook use and purchasing. The primary goal of sharing the information in this way is to bring attention to the problem as one pertaining particularly to students who are new to college and who make up a large proportion of general education courses.

2. The creation of a partnership with the university library, which has already identified resources for faculty to help them evaluate and make use of open educational resources in their courses.

3. Teaching materials addressing the issue of course material access will be available for all instructors of the introduction to college course. This will facilitate shared discussion forums where faculty and students can collectively discuss the issue of textbook use in greater detail. The primary purpose of these sessions would be to begin to establish a dialogue between students and faculty that will facilitate change.

By clarifying these tacit assumptions for faculty, the hope is to begin an honest dialogue about our practices as teachers and our expectations for students. Such a dialogue will make it easier to reveal to students the decisions to utilize materials and demystify what faculty value and why they value it.

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