

## Open textbooks are a solution to publishers' costly, bundled schoolbooks

The high price and frequent revision of school textbooks has been a pressing problem for many years. In response, the government stated in its policy address in 2008 that it intended to develop e-textbooks. However, there have not been any concrete results as yet, and publishers are still reluctant to unbundle teaching resources from textbooks or reduce textbook prices.

It is true that because e-textbooks include multimedia and interactive elements, they can be much more expensive to produce than printed textbooks. Students and teachers would also need to acquire e-book reading tablets. While vast amounts of free e-resources are available, such as those on the HKEdCity website, most of these are for the more enthusiastic and IT-savvy teachers who wish to enhance learning in the classroom. These resources cannot serve as core textbooks, which remain the focus of teaching in many schools.

One feasible solution to this dilemma is to adopt the open textbook model. Open textbooks are a type of open educational resource. Such resources are digitised materials that authors offer for free under an open licence for educators, students and self-learners to use, revise and redistribute for teaching, learning and research. Open textbooks can be delivered in electronic or printed form.

In addition to their cost advantage, open textbooks also help teachers to avoid possible copyright infringement if they try to use or remix e-materials.

Who, then, offers these resources? We are pleased to say that they are increasingly common on the internet. Wikipedia and MIT's OpenCourseWare are good examples. Locally, the Open University of Hong Kong has been sharing its educational resources for years: we have been broadcasting educational TV programmes on Sundays since 1989, and we now make available some of our learning materials for free to the general public through our website and through Apple's iTunes U.

As to open textbooks in particular, in North America, Europe and parts of Asia, including Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and South Korea, many open textbook projects have been initiated to tackle the problem of expensive textbooks.

In this context, it would seem the time is ripe for Hong Kong to set up an open textbook platform of its own and to develop open textbooks for its teachers and students.

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