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Textbooks: Changing Materiality, Changing Meaning

By Philippa Mules.
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In a print-based society the physical characteristics of books not only controlled how knowledge was accessed, stored and disseminated, but also exerted a powerful unconscious influence over our perceptions about the status of knowledge. Textbooks, encyclopaediae, journals, comics and magazines were allocated status according to their material composition - for example, the amount of time it took to produce and disseminate the publication. The knowledge tools of Western pedagogy (textbooks) have traditionally been accorded powerful credibility and respectability because they were presented in tomes that imply content with enduring value. This pre-weighting of knowledge was difficult to discern in a print-based society but now, as meaning is increasingly digitally mediated, and teachers and learners are freed from the exigencies of print/textbook based knowledge, we are reassessing and reallocating our often unconscious perceptions of the status of knowledge. This paper examines the changing materiality of three sample pedagogical texts over a 16 year period in order to reveal, through an analysis of the changing dialectics in their material modes of representation, the epistemology embedded in each text. It then generalises these findings in order to shed light on the question: how does the changing materiality of texts shape our perceptions of knowledge.

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