

University Textbooks: An Acceptable Conflict of Interest?

ÉTUDE DE CAS / CASE STUDY

Bryn Williams-Jones¹

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Résumé

Cette étude de cas examine les conflits d'intérêts qui surviennent lorsque les professeurs d'université utilisent leurs propres manuels comme lectures obligatoires dans leurs cours.

Mots clés

conflits d'intérêts, l'université, les professeurs, les manuels de cours

Summary

This case study examines the conflicts of interest that arise when university professors use as required course readings their own textbooks.

Keywords

conflict of interest, university, professors, course textbooks

Affiliations des auteurs / Author Affiliations

¹ Programmes de bioéthique, Département de médecine sociale et préventive, Faculté de médecine, Université de Montréal, Montréal, Canada

Correspondance / Correspondence

Bryn Williams-Jones, bryn.williams-jones@umontreal.ca

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Conflit d'intérêts

Bryn Williams-Jones est l'éditeur en chef de la revue et le directeur de thèse de Maude Laliberté. En tant que directeur l'[Axe éthique et santé des populations](#), Williams-Jones préside un comité consultatif sur laquelle Christopher McDougall est membre.

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Conflicts of Interest

Bryn Williams-Jones is the Editor-in-chief of the Journal and PhD supervisor of Maude Laliberté. As Director of the [Axe éthique et santé des populations](#), Williams-Jones chairs an Advisory Committee on which Christopher McDougall is a member.

This case study is based on the blog entry [Textbooks](#) on my [Conflict-of-interest.net](#) website, published Jan 29 2010, and was inspired by a story by Todd Pettigrew in Macleans magazine, entitled [Conflict of Interest and Textbooks](#).

The Case

College and University professors in North America have substantial liberty in how and what they teach in their undergraduate and graduate courses, both in terms of syllabus design and assigned readings. Professor Davies, as many of his colleagues, teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses, and quite appropriately uses different teaching materials and pedagogical approaches depending on the type of course and the number and level of students enrolled. In his graduate courses, which are invariably small group seminars of 10-15 students, Professor Davies uses a Socratic style of teaching that is entirely question and discussion driven (no lectures), and based on 3-4 articles drawn from the current academic literature. But for his first year undergraduate course, which typically counts between 80 and 120 students, he prefers a standard though interactive lecture style with PowerPoint presentations. He strives to regularly pose questions to his undergraduate audience to engage them in discussion (a challenge in a big class!), uses small break-out groups for brainstorming and group presentations, and has introduced innovative online tools and resources (a course blog, chat forum and additional reading materials). Overall, Professor Davies is happy with his class performance and regularly receives excellent student evaluations.

However, Professor Davies has been struggling for a few years to find the right reading materials for his undergraduate course; the academic articles that he would give to his graduate students are too advanced, and the course texts that he's used in the past have either been too general and/or too restrictive in the material covered, and so he has regularly supplemented these texts with additional readings, both from the academic literature (when they were sufficiently accessible to his undergraduate audience) and from his own teaching notes. Another problem with the course textbooks is that he has had complaints from students about their cost, which is often upwards of \$100, a potentially prohibitive cumulative expense for some fulltime students when each of their ten courses per academic year requires a textbook. This problem is exacerbated when professors only use a few chapters or parts of a textbook, or require a new edition of the text every year or two (thereby eliminating possible resale of used textbooks).

Professor Davies teaches his course every year, and he has been frustrated with his selection of readings. He could hand out a photocopied course package of articles, but that's "So 20th Century!", and in practice, course packages still require regular updating. Instead, Professor Davies has decided that the best solution would be to write his own textbook. While his course content is diverse, it maps well onto developments in his field and he knows quite a few colleagues at other universities who would be interested in such a textbook. Through a colleague with contacts at *Big Name Publisher*, Professor Davies secured his very first book contract. Building primarily on his own extremely detailed teaching notes, but also with some select "classic" articles integrated into the book, Professor Davies aimed to stay on the cutting edge of pedagogical innovation, and so wrote the book in such a way that the text linked directly to his PowerPoint presentations (which are included with the textbook) and to his course website where there are additional resources, study questions, etc. In the hardcopy version the links are in the text, but knowing the predilection of this current generation of students, Professor Davies ensured that an eBook was also published so that students more comfortable with laptops and tablet computers than with traditional books would benefit (e.g., easier to follow in class, no need for paper handouts or lugging a heavy textbook).

Delighted with and proud of the final product, in his first class of the term Professor Davies explains his syllabus, teaching philosophy, and the use of and thus need to purchase the required course textbook that he has written. He explains to his new class that in keeping with previous students' concerns about pricing, he negotiated hard with the publisher and managed to keep the price of the hardcopy at \$70, and \$50 for the eBook. He strongly recommends the eBook because of its interactivity and ease of use, and the eBook has an additional advantage in that students get the following version (with all the upgrades) for a fraction of the initial purchase price. He is surprised when a young student in the front asks "Professor Davies, I agree that the course textbook appears to

be an excellent product – I’ve just downloaded the eBook through my tablet – but why didn’t you go Open Source instead of requiring us to pay to purchase?” And to this, another and older looking student adds “Sir, by requiring us to purchase a book that you wrote – and not another textbook – you will presumably receive royalties. Does that not place you in a financial conflict of interest? And by the way, how much money do you receive per book, and for our course?”

Caught off-guard by these questions, Professor Davies, quick on his feet, explains that in answer to the first question, he went with *Big Name Publisher* because they offered to do all the formatting and provide regular support for annual updates and web development; given his other research and teaching commitments, he could simply not do this formatting and updating himself as would be required with the Open Source model. Professor Davies goes on to explain, in response to the second question, that to his knowledge “standard” royalties vary depending on the publisher, with between 10-15% for hardcopy text sales, and 25-50% for eBooks because of the lower production costs. The royalty agreement with *Big Name Publisher* specifies 15% per hardcopy text and 30% per eBook sold, which would amount to between \$1050 and \$1500 for a class of 100 students. Pointing out that that this falls rather short of a get rich quick scheme, Professor Davies nonetheless acknowledges the conflict of interest. Recognising a teaching opportunity when it presents itself, he decides to capitalise on the expertise in his class and so asks the second student “Clearly you have some knowledge about conflicts of interest: could you please explain to the class what this is, why it’s problematic in our case and more generally, and what you suggest might be a reasonable solution?”

Questions to consider

1. In a class of 100 students, Professor Davies’ financial interest is relatively low.
 - Would the financial interest be different if the course were more popular, say 500 students, and given twice a year?
 - Would an increase in the royalty rate to 50% for eBooks change the perception of the risk or magnitude of the conflict of interest (COI)?
 - Would the use of the textbook by colleagues at other universities, and thus increased royalties, make more problematic the COI?
2. A potential harm of the financial COI is bias or perception of bias in the choice of appropriate textbooks (e.g., a reduced range of viewpoints or topics studied). Yet, in this case, there were few or no other appropriate texts from which to choose.
 - Should Professor Davies’ financial interest raise questions about the appropriateness of his choice to write his own book, instead of using an existing (even if less appropriate) textbook?
 - Would this perception change if there were other equally good textbooks to choose from?
3. A solution to eliminate this financial COI would be the prohibition of professors from using as required readings in their own courses textbooks which they have written.
 - Would this restriction on academic freedom be justified given the risk to the professor’s and the institution’s credibility and integrity?
 - Would placing confidence in a professor’s ability to choose the most appropriate material not be sufficient?
 - Should Professor Davies be prohibited from publicizing the textbook to his colleagues at other institutions?
4. Professor Davies’ response, that is disclosure to and discussion of the COI with the class, proved to be a stimulating learning opportunity.
 - What innovative solutions might Professor Davies and his class develop to mitigate the financial interest?

- Would giving up on the financial interest be the best solution? What about giving up only the royalties gained from his classes, and not those derived from external sales?
5. Should Professor Davies not simply avoid all the trouble by going Open Source and producing his own free eBook, even if the final result would be less polished than with *Big Name Publisher*?
- Would this be fair for students who would prefer a hardcopy?

Suggested Readings

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