



A NEW CHAPTER FOR TEXTBOOKS

It's no secret that Gen Z gets its information in ways that are vastly different from how their pre-iPhone parents learned and did research. But rather than lamenting students' changing reading habits, Dr. Jeff Sarbaum is embracing the transition and using it to innovate.

Sarbaum, a senior lecturer in economics at the Bryan School, recently co-authored an online interactive textbook that meets students where they are in this digital world. Economics Interactive – published by Pearson Higher Education – went live nationally last year, and experts believe it has the potential to set new active learning standards across the publishing industry and academia.

"Students learn best by doing, and that's what the authors have recognized," says Thomas Hayward, economics product manager at Pearson, one of the world's largest college textbook publishers. "They've created an experience that puts learners in the front seat of their own education."

Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

While a typical e-book often contains links to outside digital platforms where students can find multimedia resources or do homework assignments, Economics Interactive offers all of this in one place so students don't have to toggle back and forth. Each chapter is bookended with brief videos of Sarbaum sharing stories that explain challenging economic concepts in clear, relatable terms. Short chunks of text are punctuated with multiple choice questions, "apply it" videos, and even interactive graphing exercises in which students can change inputs to practice difficult concepts such as supply and demand curves.

"We tried to eliminate as much of the text-heavy content as possible and to use embedded multiple-choice questions as an active learning tool," Sarbaum says. "This helps keep students' brains focused." Some of the videos are stopped at specific points to ask students questions and confirm their understanding – the publisher calls these "learning speed bumps." Students can review concepts, earn credit, and find motivation along the way.

By the time the student has completed an online chapter, the homework for the next day's class has been completed as well. "Our marketing tagline is: The textbook is the homework, and the homework is the textbook," Sarbaum says. This allows the professor to use classroom time to cover more material and branch out to group-based learning activities to reinforce concepts.

The methodology is rooted in learning science as well as Sarbaum's own observations after teaching more than 20,000 students in two decades. One of his co-authors, Michael Parkin, a renowned economist who has published more than 40 textbooks, said Sarbaum's classroom experience was vital to the project.

"We tried to put ourselves in the position of 18- to 22-year-olds and consider what they would find an attractive way of learning," Parkin says. "Jeff has an incredible attention to detail regarding what students are doing today and how to keep them engaged."



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Dr. Jeff Sarbaum
Senior Lecturer
Department of Economics

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Best in the Business

Hayward agrees. "Jeff is well known among economics educators as being someone who is dedicated to his students and who is doing very innovative things focused on interactivity and engagement in the classroom. What Jeff provides is the voice and passion and understanding of teaching students in a remote environment, and he has decades plus experience in doing that."

The textbook, which was piloted at UNC Greensboro, is currently being used at about a dozen universities and Pearson engaged in a marketing push last summer aimed at broad pickup across the country. In keeping with students' broad digital preferences, the product can be accessed via desktop, laptop, iPad or iPhone. The authors also hope its price point, which is lower than most print books, will support educational equity.

Sarbaum feels grateful to have been involved with this project. He credits the Bryan School for giving him the flexibility and instructional freedom to develop online education over the years, recognizing it was a growing way to meet its diverse student body's needs for access.

"If UNCG hadn't supported creative efforts and out-of-the-box thinking about how to do education a little differently, I wouldn't have been brought into this project," he says. "The ability I had to do these things with the Bryan School enabled me to do this on a national stage." ■