Why I Regret Getting Rid of My Old Textbooks

Shôn Ellerton, August 8, 2024
Call me a sentimental old fool, but why do I regret getting rid of all my old engineering textbooks?

Have you ever regretted getting rid of all your old textbooks?

I have.

Although, I did have a valid reason insofar that I was in the process of moving from the United Kingdom to Australia. So, in order to reduce the amount of stuff to bring over, I donated them all to the University of Warwick.

But that was a mistake I was later to discover.

Although most of my career has been in the IT and telecommunications industry, my degree was in civil engineering. I had bought most of my books which included a rich selection of topics ranging from fluid dynamics, water quality, structural engineering, geology, geotechnical engineering, mechanics, building design, statistics, hydrology, surveying, concrete and steel design, acoustics and lighting, and many more.

All these books were beautifully produced featuring wonderful diagrams, exotic formulae, and examples for the student to follow. What I had never realised at the time is that I might be interested to see them again. After all, I had never needed to reference them during my transition into telecommunications and IT. During that period, I had collected countless thick tomes of programming and database books covering SQL Server, ASP.NET, PHP, C#, Data Warehousing, and my old trusty favourite at the time, VBA. Not to mention all the technical material I

gathered during my training in the world of mobile telecommunications, most of which was drowned in a sea of unfathomable acronyms.

Ridiculous as it may be, I brought over most of the IT books, which, fifteen years later, had become utterly redundant and useless. I ended up trying to give them away in local charity shops, but even they were reluctant to take them. However, the engineering books would have been still largely relevant for today, and it was a great shame to get rid of them.

In today's world, much of our teaching is either online, through video, or by reading electronic pdf files. Theoretically, the same amount of information, if not a great deal more, can be found online of course. However, it is often a disjointed exercise.

Why?

Sure enough, it is lightning fast to use an online search engine to find an answer to a solution, or to seek out tutorial videos, or rummage through forums for knowledge, but the feel of a textbook cannot be replaced. There is a sense of consistency when browsing through a book. The sequence of knowledge laid out in a book makes it not only intuitive but interesting.

It's that feeling of going into a bookshop and leafing through some new books. Stumbling across a subject which grabs your fancy. Perhaps it's a book on water quality with quality technical drawings of sedimentary tanks, wastewater lagoons, multi-flash distillation and reverse osmosis plants. Or geotechnical textbooks featuring diagrams of flow nets and phreatic surfaces for retaining wall design. Or building design textbooks with wonderful exploded diagrams of all the materials required to build an acoustically insulated environment. Even the world of concrete design often makes interesting reading when casually browsing through a well-written and designed textbook. Of course, this is my own personal experience as an engineer.

An interesting feature of textbooks with well-drawn diagrams is the way it can leave an impressionable memory upon the reader. For those who were brought up in the world of textbooks in school and college will, undoubtedly, be familiar with that curiosity of browsing through a textbook when you first receive it.

What's it like at the end of the book?

How advanced will it be?

What will I learn?

In our new world of online learning and digital books, it is not nearly the same. Sure, you can browse to the end of the digital book, but in many cases, learning is often online through separate modules which are given to the student.

Today's online study is often featureless, sterile, disjointed, and frankly, very messy.

My son, who is in school, does not have textbooks. He is given printed out pieces of paper and then told to research the material and go online to do his homework. The odd assortment of bits of paper representing the homework he has to do is unceremoniously glue-sticked into a workbook.

Humans are visually drawn to patterns, colours, and presentation. This may be an odd thing to consider, but our memories can be so intrinsically attached to the cover of a textbook, that it sparks off memories that recollect the actual content within the textbook. I bet that you, as the reader, can remember the colour and general feel of a textbook you were given to as a child, if you were fortunate enough to be given textbooks rather than online material.

Yes, a textbook is a nuisance to carry around, I grant anyone that argument clearly. However, the tactile nature of its physicality immerses the scholar far more deeply than a virtual and clinical copy of it.

One must ask the question.

Why do many of us love to have our own libraries at home with real books on shelves? It's not as if most of us will find time to read them. Even if a book is already been read, it remains in the library as a physical object to remind us that the book has been read and conquered. As for those books unread, they sit there and gather dust hoping that someone will inadvertently stumble across them.

I have a reasonable library at home comprising of books which I have read and have not read. Classics, instruction books on how to fly an aeroplane, rock climbers guides, Far Side comic books, coffee table books, historical novels, and many weird and wonderful books covering esoterica and the mystical.

But I miss my old textbooks.

Why did I get rid of them?