A recent *American Psychologist* article on teaching (Gurung et al., 2016) stressed the importance of fostering integration across topic areas. A current trend in publishing and marketing of textbooks is creating pressure that makes this goal harder to implement. The trend is offering custom tailoring of online texts by adopters, letting instructors assign some sections and make other sections unavailable to students. To permit this option, textbook publishers now insist that authors not cross-reference anywhere, so that no instructor will face the possibility of a student looking for material that has not been assigned and thus does not exist. Ironically, this pressure from publishers actively impedes conceptual integration in our textbooks.

*Keywords:* teaching, integration, linkage

A recent *American Psychologist* article (Gurung et al., 2016) discussed ways to improve introductory psychology courses. One theme in that article was the desirability of making “an explicit effort to compare, link, and integrate content topic areas” (p. 117) on the part of both instructors and textbook writers. Although the focus was on the introductory course, it should be clear that an effort to compare, link, and integrate content topic areas is likely to be desirable in most courses, if not all.

A serious obstacle to such efforts is being created, however, by contemporary practices in textbook publishing and marketing. Major publishers, in moving to online texts, are encouraging instructors to customize their courses by choosing which chapters—even sections within chapters—to assign to their students. Whatever parts are not assigned will simply be invisible to that instructor’s students.

Freedom of choice for the instructor—it sounds great! But what seems at first to be a well-meaning attempt to make textbooks instructor friendly turns out to have adverse ramifications (providing yet another illustration of the law of unintended consequences). Given the option to customize, no one can know ahead of time what parts of the text any instructor will retain. If—at any point, anywhere in the text—the author refers to something that is discussed elsewhere, a problem occurs, because there is no way to be sure the instructor has adopted that other part of the text. If a particular instructor’s custom version does not include that section, the cross-reference would be pointing to something that doesn’t exist.

Publishers are offering instructors the chance to customize as a selling point (although I know of no evidence that instructors actually take up the option). In fact, this selling point has taken on a great deal of power—apparently, enough power to push aside an important pedagogical principle. Here’s how powerful it is. In light of the problem that would potentially be created by any effort on the part of the author to integrate across sections of material, publishers are now pressuring authors not to cross-reference.

I know this from first-hand experience (and from a colleague with a different publisher). My coauthor and I were told not to cross-reference anything in the new edition of our personality text (Carver & Scheier, 2017), which had been scheduled to migrate to the publisher’s online platform. Given that our text actually emphasizes “comparisons, linkages, and integration across content areas,” however, we were unwilling (in fact, unable) to comply with this instruction. As a result, the new edition will not migrate to the new format after all, but will remain printed on paper (which has now become loose-leaf binder paper, as bound books retreat into the past). And imagine how enthusiastically the publisher will promote a book that does not fit the corporation’s format-of-the-future.

Let me be clear that the problem is not the shift to electronic publishing. Our text could be published electron-
ically without any difficulty, loaded with hyperlinks letting readers go back and forth between places where ideas made cross-connections. The problem is that you cannot include those cross-connections if you also are going to let the instructor omit a chapter to which any of them connect. Publishers are letting what is really a sales gimmick dictate the substantive content of the text. If any reader is concerned about this, I suggest you pass your concerns up the marketing chain.

Here is a place where what seemed like a good idea at the time actually creates an impediment to the goals of educators. Publishers are actively trying to suppress the very practice that Gurung et al. (2016) recommended. Instructors are going to have to decide what is more important—the chance to customize the material their students are exposed to, or the opportunity to foster integration across content areas—because the two are apparently incompatible.

References

Received March 1, 2016
Revision received June 8, 2016
Accepted June 10, 2016