Mc Graw Hill

Case Study University of Alabama Creates a Course that Literally Sings

DEFINING THE FOREFRONT OF LEARNING

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For years, Kevin Woosley toyed with the idea of creating his own textbook for the massive music appreciation course he teaches at the University of Alabama. The existing texts for the course, which is taken by some 3,000 non-music majors a semester, were at times overly technical and often ended with music in the 1950s.

“I wanted to take the history of music and the key concepts and tie it into the 2020 college student’s life. Nothing seemed to make a modern connection for students as much as we desired,” says Woosley. “For this class, these are not musicians, we needed something more relevant, that did a better job of connecting old and new.”

In the summer of 2017, Woosley, 34, began working closely with a team from McGraw Hill Higher Education Group for nine months on his manuscript’s creation. Woosley produced numerous engaging short chapters around lectures he had given in the last decade.

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Kevin Woosley, Instructor, University of Alabama





Each chapter was peppered with photographs, and external links to numerous playlists Woosley curated on Spotify. Original videos as well as YouTube videos were embedded in the manuscript. Woosley also worked with a University of Alabama colleague to create three original videos—one on opera, another on music composition, and a third on 70's and 80's 'rock 'n' roll that includes an interview with a member of the band Steppenwolf who wrote the song "Born to be Wild."

McGraw Hill's Open Learning Solutions (OLS) platform, as well as a team of employees from multiple departments, teams, and segments, enabled Woosley's manuscript to become a reality. The OLS platform created an opportunity to configure both technologies and content to the exact specifications of a customer's course/program. Content can be brought in from external sources, such as print, videos, and music, as well as created from the ground up to create individualized and unique texts. The technology also allows access to the course via Smartphones, tablets, and PC's, with the capability for students to take notes in the text.

“The combination of all these capabilities for use in one place didn’t exist before the platform’s creation,” notes Brian Coovert, the McGraw Hill Solutions Architect who led the team.

“You need a flexible, configurable technology platform, service focus, and willingness to think outside of box to pull this off,” says Jared Harless, Vice President, Open Learning Solutions for McGraw Hill’s Higher Education Group.

“It is all about engaging today’s students in new ways. We are definitely on the forefront of learning by creating this platform and utilizing this platform with faculty members,” says Coovert. “I love to say to a faculty member, what is your pie in the sky vision? We are just scratching the surface of what we can do. What’s wonderful about this is that Kevin’s project is complex, it’s robust, it’s successful, and it shows the capabilities of what we have here.”

“The textbook is the starting spot for everything,” Woosley says. “The reading, the music, and the video access are all right there.”

Leona Yeager, 19, a sophomore psychology major in the course, says the eBook brings unanticipated enjoyment to the class, particularly with its seamless use of Spotify and videos.

“I’m more active and more engaged because I can listen to it right away,” she says. “It’s easy to put things off as a student, but having everything right there, all together, instead of having to go to different mediums changes the dynamic. Hard copies of textbooks just aren’t as interesting anymore, you’re just flipping through the pages and that’s it.”

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WE WORKED AS A TEAM TO BRING IDEAS TO LIFE

McGraw Hill already had a history with the University of Alabama when Woosley started there in 2007 for his master's and doctorate degrees. The next year, 2008, he began teaching. "We always worked with them for our textbook needs," he says.

Woosley had long toyed with the idea of creating his own interactive music appreciation textbook. His strong existing relationship with McGraw Hill prompted him to approach the company for help launching his innovative idea.

"We decided to go with McGraw Hill for many reasons, aside from the fact that they are a fantastic company, and very easy to work with," Woosley says. "I was already very familiar with them, our teachers already knew how to use the online systems that McGraw Hill used, so everything would flow much better."

It was important for Woosley to write his own book because the existing music appreciation textbooks covered information that seemed designed solely for music majors, including dry, irrelevant material that pushed non-music majors "away from the subject matter," he says. "I have plenty of students who are an accounting major or a biology major and they say, 'Why do I need a music class?' I use that as driving force in the book by ending every

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chapter with a paragraph on 'here's how this connects to you as a 21st century college student.'"

"I told the team that I didn't want this to seem like a textbook," he says. "I wanted something fun and vibrant. There are lots of pictures, and I am big into puns and dad jokes, and I put them in. Hopefully, while the students are reading, they will stay engaged and be interested in the topic."

Woosley credits the McGraw Hill team for driving the vision of what was possible during their weekly calls.

"They are very good at creating exactly what I wanted to create, instead of them saying, 'Here is how we are going to use this,' they said, 'here are some ideas, what do you think?'" he recalls.





INSTRUCTORS HAVE A WIDE RANGE OF OPTIONS.

When Woolsey wanted to introduce a film into the course, he knew how to make a video, but from there, he didn't know how it could become part of his eBook. The team took care of that, from scanning the film for images to blur out due to copyright issues to embedding each video into the corresponding chapter. The McGraw Hill team was also invaluable when it came to Woosley's choice of photos, giving him access to a rich database of images. The permissions department worked on securing the use of copyrighted photos while the design group created the cover of the eBook and its layout.

"All the time I was getting emails from people asking, 'Do you like the layout on the page, do you like this color scheme?' We worked well as a team to bring things to life."

Woosley also worked one-on-one with a team member to create a bank of quizzes and tests that students could take from within the eBook. The majority are true/false and multiple choice, graded electronically via the book's home on McGraw Hill's Open Learning Solutions platform. And instructors have a wide range of options: courses can be created by using all original content, as was the case with Woosley, all of McGraw Hill Education's content, or by using a blend of these and other sources.

"We can work from a blank canvas," says Coovert. "We not only have this platform, but we've been able to put it into practice with a number of different types of content."

Harless says that the platform's technology along with McGraw Hill's team of experts solve many of the problems instructors face when trying to build a digital text or course themselves.

"The inevitable problem is, particularly if it is at scale, how are they going to deliver it on the phone?" Harless says. "Do they want to leverage adaptive technology to make a more personalized learning experience for the students? Is it going to plug into the learning management system at the school? We are taking care of all of that for them and providing the authoring tools to make that happen."

Woosley's book launched on August 22 in all eight of the course's class sections, each with some 400 students. (Woosley teaches two of the sections and supervises the remainder.) Almost immediately, the McGraw Hill team received real-time feedback from Woolsey and his students, resulting in changes in the ebook for Spring, 2019.

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McGraw Hill Solutions Architect

“It’s not like we are going to change content in a book and three years later you see the change,” says Coovert. “This is on the forefront, in that we can change this from term to term, we can keep it fresh for the students and keep the faculty members happy.”

Woosley expects to do an anonymous survey of all the students at the semester’s end to get a better gauge of the online book’s impact. For him, the project has exceeded his expectations.

“Coming into the project I don’t think I had a specific endgame picture, and that is where the team helps, to create an exact image,” he says. “The formatting of the book and the media involved, it’s all been fantastic. Everything has worked.”

McGraw Hill's
Open Learning Solutions

To learn how you can build your own course using McGraw Hill technology and content email us at OLS@mheducation.com

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