

MAUT tackling issues around students selling course material

by Renee Sieber, elected MAUT Council member

Used to be a student who missed a class asked the student sitting next to her/him for the lecture notes. Not anymore. A student can now visit any number of websites (e.g., coursehero, flashnotes, and oneclass) that sell course material produced or uploaded by students. And students get compensated for submitting that material, whether they took notes or they're lifting content produced by the professor. Various known as the class notes, social learning platform or crowdsourced university content marketplace, this is a multimillion-dollar business. As of March, total funding for Flashnotes is now more than \$14 million (<http://www.bizjournals.com/boston/blog/startups/2015/03/online-study-materials-marketplace-flashnotes.html>). Add to that, both the bookstore Barnes & Noble and the textbook publisher Cengage Learning are investing in Flashnotes (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2014/09/09/airbnb-for-student-notes-cengage-creates-digital-marketplace-for-classroom-study-guides/iNyaPCzJBiPz2oe9rT5Wnk/story.html>).

Sounds like a win for students, who get quick access and money and for these new firms. But what about professors?

The sharing of course notes and retention of old exams have been with us for some time. Modern course content has moved past notes and exams to include material like lecture slides and course audio and video. The content is easily accessible online, aggregated, and for free or at a minimal cost. Students are increasingly used to the convenience of these sites; they may view access to course material on these sites as rights issue, where impedance is an affront to students' ability to survive in a highly competitive academic market. Accessible course material may assist in students' studies but these days it can help their wallets as well. Students are enticed by possibility to earn hundreds or thousands of dollars from these sites. Professors at least can engage students directly in these issues. It is more difficult for professors to deal with the companies that are benefiting from professors' content. Not surprisingly, professors are discomforted:

"Some professors and administrators, however, have chafed at the idea of a site that encourages students to take professors' intellectual output, post it without permission, and then allow a company to sell access to it for profit." (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/10/06/coursehero>) and "There is something a little unsavory about selling your notes and turning them into a commodity," said Craig R. Vasey, chair of the Committee on Teaching, Research, and Publication at the American Association of University Professors. "It seems to be at odds with the spirit of higher education." (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2014/09/09/airbnb-for-student-notes-cengage-creates-digital-marketplace-for-classroom-study-guides/iNyaPCzJBiPz2oe9rT5Wnk/story.html>)

Professors at McGill are already coping with increasing amounts of their course content being uploaded to these sites. The impacts are varied and troubling:

- A company has distributed course material that includes content, which is property of a textbook publisher.
- A company has published audio recordings of guest lecturers.
- A student has attributed opinions to a faculty member based on comments extracted from course materials.
- A professor has been quoted in a newspaper based on what was printed in course notes.
- A professor has spent many hours of back-and-forth negotiation with a classnotes company to remove course material from its site.
- Remedies are time-consuming and limited. Many professors are confronting difficult decisions about whether they should restrict or eliminate this kind of course material.

MAUT is concerned about the impact of the classnotes marketplace on McGill professors. We want your views on the subject and any personal experiences. What would you hope to see MAUT do about this issue? Send these thoughts to maut@mcgill.ca.