

# Dawn of the Un-Book

Malleability, multimedia and more • BY JAY CROSS



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**C**LOs know that extracting meaning from growing mountains of information is tougher than ever before. The walls between disciplines are falling. Specialization, knowing more and more about less and less, is no longer an option. Everything is connected to everything else.

Reality is an endless stream of knowledge, culture and ideas that flows faster and faster. Traditional books are snapshots of that stream. The swifter the stream, the shorter the life of the book. A book is an event. We need a process that outlasts the moment — a movie in place of a photograph.

“I AM OUT OF TIME. You bought the beta edition of this book. Things change so fast that all books are dated by the time they are published. The world is moving too fast for closure. Our lives are in beta.”

So began my 2006 book, *Informal Learning: Rediscovering the Natural Pathways That Inspire Innovation and Performance*. The day it was published, my ideas were frozen in time, inert and unyielding to change. My author journey from outline to printed book took the better part of a year.

Something's wrong here.

Books have been a mainstay of self-directed learning for centuries. CLOs may not break out the cost of books in the budget, but they assuredly invest heavily in them.

Books are not the ideal way to present subjects that change rapidly. Before I'm accused of calling for the death of books, permit me to say that works of art are timeless. Books such as *Moby Dick*, *The Little Engine That Could*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *David Copperfield* are unbeatable. These novels and stories are whole unto themselves. That's not the case for most nonfiction.

Wake-up call to the publishing industry: Why don't you produce books that are current? Where are the pictures and maps? Why is the text all one size and color? Why don't you provide updates on the Web? Why does it take a year to turn out a book? Why do most books come out as if one size fits all? Why don't you encourage conversation with authors? How long do you expect to remain in business if you continue to act like fossils?

The publishing industry hardly has changed at all since the first paperback was printed in Venice. A page

from the 1493 edition of Virgil's *Aeneid* looks very similar to a page from *The Social Life of Information* printed 500 years later: rectangles of monochromatic text, no illustrations, page numbers in the corner and 1-inch margins all around.

A study by the Jenkins Group, a custom book publishing firm, found that:

- One-third of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives.
- 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after college.
- 80 percent of U.S. families did not buy or read a book last year.
- 70 percent of U.S. adults have not been in a bookstore in the past five years.
- 57 percent of new books are not read to completion.

Increasingly, people hunt and gather what they want to read. Today's activist readers pluck information from the blogosphere and YouTube and their friends on Facebook and MySpace.

To prosper in times ahead, we need to reconceptualize our relationship with books, the role of authors and how to make books better. The shorthand for what I have in mind is the “un-book.” Here are some of the characteristics of un-books:

- Un-books are guidebooks for knowledge explorers navigating the flow of the news, information, sound bites, observations, debate, hacks, diatribes and memes that are the Web. Un-books invite participation. Participants choose how deeply they want to explore a topic and can remix content to create the learning experience they seek. Un-books link to the flow of knowledge, not sanctified facts. Treat that knowledge as community property, and the community will maintain and improve it. Many authors may write guidebooks to the same stream of knowledge, and a single author may create many un-books from a single stream.
- Un-books are inherently multimedia. One of those media is paper. Paper is portable, familiar and easy to annotate. A hard-copy book conveys authority.

A spokesman for Alpo dog food long ago said the product was so good that he fed it to his own dogs. Using one's own products is known as “eating the dog food.” In lieu of writing a book, I am going on the dog-food diet. Any CLOs want to join me? **CLO**

## DATA POINT

One-third of high school graduates never read another book for the rest of their lives. Additionally, 42 percent of college graduates never read another book after college.