

Supporting STEM Learning by Redesigning the Textbook

Creating High-Completion CS Online Learning Using Educational Psychology Principles

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1 Redesigning Learning by Redesigning the Textbook

In computer science, research results have surprisingly little impact on teacher practices [6]. Computer science teachers are influenced by practical concerns. They care about what students say [5]. They care about having textbooks match the curriculum that they want to teach [11].

The hypothesis underlying our *CSLearning4U* project is that we can improve learning by improving textbooks. By redesigning the textbook, we can redesign the learning experience [15]. Even more important for our purposes, we aim to design textbooks to meet the learning needs of a particular populations.

The goal of the *CSLearning4U* project is to develop effective and more efficient computer science teaching and learning in order to serve professional development for high school teachers. Computer science education today is based on apprenticeship, where bits of instruction (in lecture, videos/MOOCs, or books) precede hours of student practice at a development environment. Our studies of high school teachers suggest that they need a different model:

- High school teachers are working professionals with significant time constraints. They often fail at on-line learning simply because of the external demands on their lives [8].
- The apprenticeship of computer science education match the activities of software developers, but not high school computer science teachers [16].
- The support for the teacher community is critical. Teachers who develop a sense of identity as computer science teachers are more likely to be retained, to join professional organizations, and to seek out additional professional development [25, 20]. Since few states offer computer science teacher certification, having a community with role models is an important part of developing that sense of identity [24].
- Teachers need a sense of confidence and self-efficacy to succeed as computer science teachers. Developing that confidence is related to computer science content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (*how to teach*) [24, 26, 23].

To meet the learning needs of high school CS teachers means that we change how we teach and what we teach.

Our goal is to support students and teachers learning the new CS Principles curriculum through innovative educational technology whose design is informed by educational psychology principles [12]. We are developing a new model for online learning using a dynamic, web-based book (or ebook), informed by principles of educational psychology. We believe that ebooks can have higher completion rates than a MOOC, with learning comparable to face-to-face classes.

While our focus is on computer science, the same approaches might be useful in other STEM disciplines. Our work uses educational psychology principles to design ebooks that meet the particular needs of our learners, high school computer science teachers. Different STEM learners have different learning needs. Our approach to design and the features we include in our ebooks may be useful in the design of textbooks for other STEM learners.

2 Designing an Ebook to Meet Learner Needs

We create a more efficient practice by drawing on educational psychology. We call our approach the *examples+practice model*, because we draw most significantly on the literature on creating effective examples [29, 31, 4] and on practice

(exercises used to encourage reflection on examples and develop skills) based on cognitive tutors research [3, 9, 2]. Our ebook for prospective teachers of the new AP CS Principles (CSP) course that incorporates findings from educational psychology: worked examples interleaved with practice activities, dual modality presentations, low cognitive load exercises including Parsons Problems, and social support from small groups.

We have described the structure of our ebooks in other publications [13, 14, 12]. Here, we describe one example. Figure 1 shows Python code running in the book, accessed from a Web browser. Note that the code is segmented by subgoal labels, which are common across multiple programs. The subgoal labels have been shown to lead to better learning and retention in several experiments[22, 21].

Several of the programs are challenges in the student version of the ebook. The teacher version of the ebook includes answers in a separate tab. There is support for discussion about each problem, also available in a separate tab.

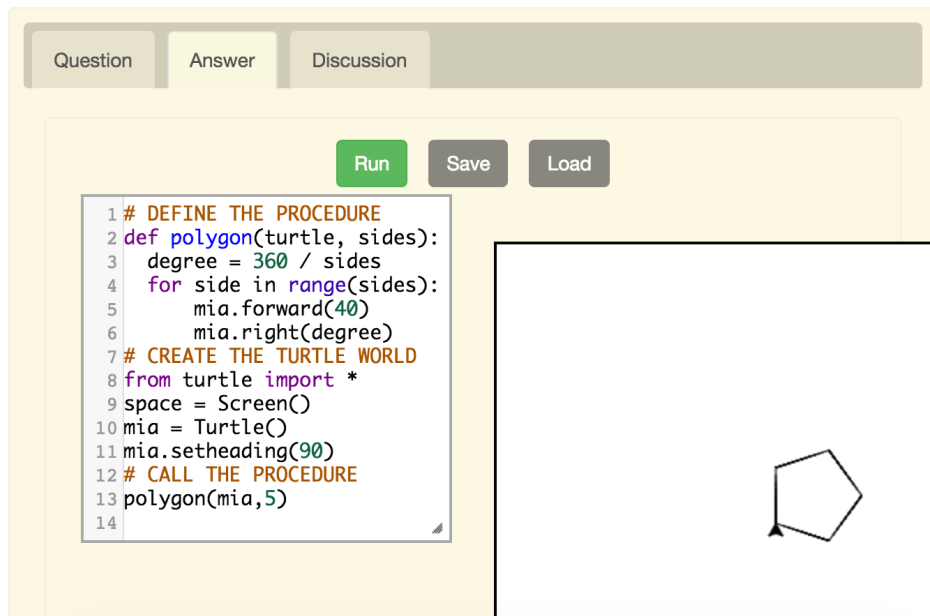


Figure 1: Executable code with subgoal labels, and answer and discussion tabs

Besides the discussion tabs, our teacher ebook includes support for small reading groups. A reading group can set a schedule for completing chapters of the book. The design goal is to create social pressure to complete the book and support a sense of community.

3 Results from our Ebook Studies

We have conducted several studies of our ebook. The first was a usability survey comparing three different ebook platforms: Runestone Interactive, Zyante, and CS Circles. Runestone did well in the survey, just beating out Zyante, and both were far ahead of CS Circles [13].

One of our surprises in use of the ebook has been the wide range of variability among students even on the low cognitive load practice activities. Computer science teachers expect a wide range of variability in coding activity [1, 19]. Our ebooks use a form of practice called *Parsons Problems* [27] where readers shuffle existing lines of code into a correct order. While many readers solve these problems quickly, a significant percentage of students take dozens of trials to solve them correctly [14]. Even in low cognitive load activities, we are challenged to support a wide range of student ability.

We conducted a trial with prospective high school computer science teachers. Ten teachers qualified for our study (i.e., scored less than 40% on a pretest). We asked them to read eight chapters of the ebook. Every two chapters, there was a post-test on those two chapters.

Some of our findings [13] include:

- 50% of the study participants finished all 8 chapters. That’s good and higher than expected from studies of teachers learning in MOOCs [28], but isn’t directly comparable to MOOC studies because we did offer them a

\$50 gift card for completing.

- As we expected and designed for, teachers read the books in chunks of time when they could fit it in. Figure 2 describes one teacher’s progression through the ebook, where each point represents use of a practice exercise. We see use of several exercises on one day, then a few more on the next day, and so on. Teachers are good learners who actively self-monitor and sometimes review or repeat prior exercises.
- Most importantly, those teachers who used the book (e.g., did the Parsons Problems, ran the code examples, answered multiple choice questions, etc.), reported increased confidence in teaching CS and they performed well on the post-tests. This is likely the first time that a study has shown improved learning and confidence by teachers without relying on program writing as the main practice activity. We are showing that writing code is not the only way to learn CS for high school teachers. Many CS teachers believe that apprenticeship is the only way to learn CS [18, 6, 7], but we believe that we can successfully use a range of pedagogical practices.

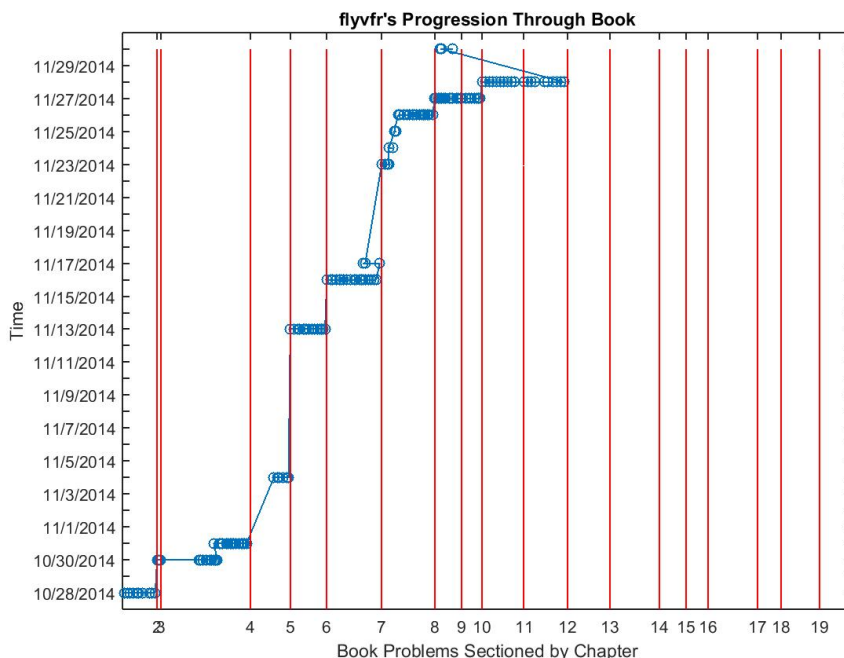


Figure 2: Charting a teacher’s progress through the ebook exercises

3.1 Challenges to Conducting This Work

Our work aims to compare ebook use between teachers and students and between offline and online use. In one study, we aim to compare our CSP ebook to a face-to-face CSP class and to a set of students interested in studying CSP online. We plan to compare these students for learning outcomes and for completion rates. In a second study, we plan to contrast our two CSP ebooks, one for teachers and one for students. By comparing these populations, we can develop a better understanding of how non-traditional and traditional students use e-books differently. We are building upon our previous work in establishing valid and reliable measures of CS learning [30] to carefully measure reader’s learning gains. We hypothesize that our approach will lead to higher completion rates, with significant learning gains, especially for underprepared learners.

It has been surprisingly difficult to get access to a CS Principles (CSP) face-to-face classroom in which we can trial our new interventions. Public high schools in our area are reluctant to provide access to their students for studies. Few universities are currently offering CSP.

We are finding that studying online learning is challenging in ways we had not expected. We just completed a larger study with many more teachers in Summer 2015, but are finding that the log data is difficult to trace. Teachers frequently forgot their usernames and simply created new ones, making log file analysis difficult. In our studies of

students, we find that teachers sometime have students reuse usernames, so that log entries for different students are indistinguishable.

4 Conclusion: Ebooks are a Promising Alternative to MOOCs

MOOCs have proven to be a successful form of professional development, especially for well-educated, affluent majority males [17, 10]. However, they are unlikely to be the best form of education for all students. In particular, the success rates with teachers are not particularly high [28]. We believe that ebooks are a promising medium for meeting the specific needs of computer science teachers.

More generally, we believe we should be designing textbooks to meet needs of learners. Our work with ebooks demonstrates the approach with high school teachers as our target learning population. We are creating a model for how new kinds of interactive textbooks might be developed for other STEM disciplines.

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