‘POP’ your Docs
Using background shapes to add some dynamics

You look at the document or PowerPoint that you just created and realize that it is pretty plain and boring. On the other hand, you don’t want to waste your time looking through the assortment of Office templates trying to find the “right” one. But just by drawing a few strategically-placed rectangles, you can easily add the enhancements that will make your document, flier, or presentation have some life.

The basic idea is that layering semi-transparent shapes behind and around text can help direct the eye through a page of information, can highlight the important parts, and can add a sense of flow and motion to static text.

In the example above, the layering and use of colors help to chunk the information and make important things (location, whom to contact) pop out for easy readability.

The option to make a shape transparent is a bit hidden in the Office products (unlike with Pages and the rest of Apple’s suite), so visit my blog for a handy video showing how this process is done, and learn to easily enhance your course materials and publications.
A Retrofitted E-Book
How not to ditch your textbook for the sake of technology

In 2008 the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) published an article that asked, “E-Books in Higher Education: Nearing the End of the Era of Hype?” (bolding taking on Betteridge’s Law of Headlines). Several years later, we are still just dipping our toes into the e-book waters. A 2013 report by Hanover Research entitled, “Usage of E-Books in Higher Education,” cited various studies that found that roughly 20% of college students have purchased e-textbooks, which account for 9% of the global textbook market. Several conflicting viewpoints are analyzed in this report, citing research both in favor of e-books and against them.

The bottom line is that there is still a preference for print books, but the strength of this preference is a bit unclear. One study reported a 75% preference for printed texts to e-books, yet another study reported a 40% print preference, a 25% e-book preference, and the typical 35% of college students not really caring either way. In either case, not surprising to anyone who is familiar with instructional technology research, the preference depends more on the instructor’s methods than on the technology. Students who use e-books simply as a shinier substitute for print tend to prefer print. Likewise, if you have a Swiss Army Knife but only use it for the scissors, it will never be as good as a “real” pair of scissors. Students who use e-books as a media, communication, and collaboration portal are less likely to prefer print, and they report that the e-books have a positive impact on their learning experiences.

From the faculty perspective, there is sometimes legitimate concern that content quality is sacrificed in favor of flash when new technology takes the place of older methods. Some textbooks are really good and should still be used. But at the same time, their lack of interaction and static nature limits their impact on students. The big benefit of e-books is that they bundle advanced capabilities along with the content, allowing students to view media, manipulate objects, and interact with each other, all within their “reading” experience. But like most transitions in education, the best approach might be to bridge the gap with the right balance between the established practices and the next level of engagement. There needs to be a way to keep the high-quality print textbooks but give them the interaction that is possible in our connected age.

Good news. This is possible through a really cool *and free* Augmented Reality program and app called Aurasma. With Aurasma and a mobile device, students are able to overlay digital media on real-life objects. Essentially, you get much of the interactivity of an e-book while still having the content and familiarity of a textbook. To test it out I worked with a textbook that I just had lying around: Agriculture for the Kansas Common Schools (1945, first printing in 1914). They just don’t make ’em like this anymore.

By setting up a “channel” through the Aurasma Studio and adding “auras” to some of the images in a chapter, I can now instantly view demonstration videos where before sat less effective images (as pictured at right). I can access websites with extended information. I can be directed instantly to a webpage to share my thoughts on a passage or to take a quiz in Canvas.

But Aurasma isn’t limited to textbooks. Virtually anything that you could take an uncluttered picture of could be the site of some pop-up interactivity: signs, buildings, art, a picture of you... It is well worth some exploration.

To help get started and to see what else I did with my really really old book (plus some other extras) visit this article on my blog.