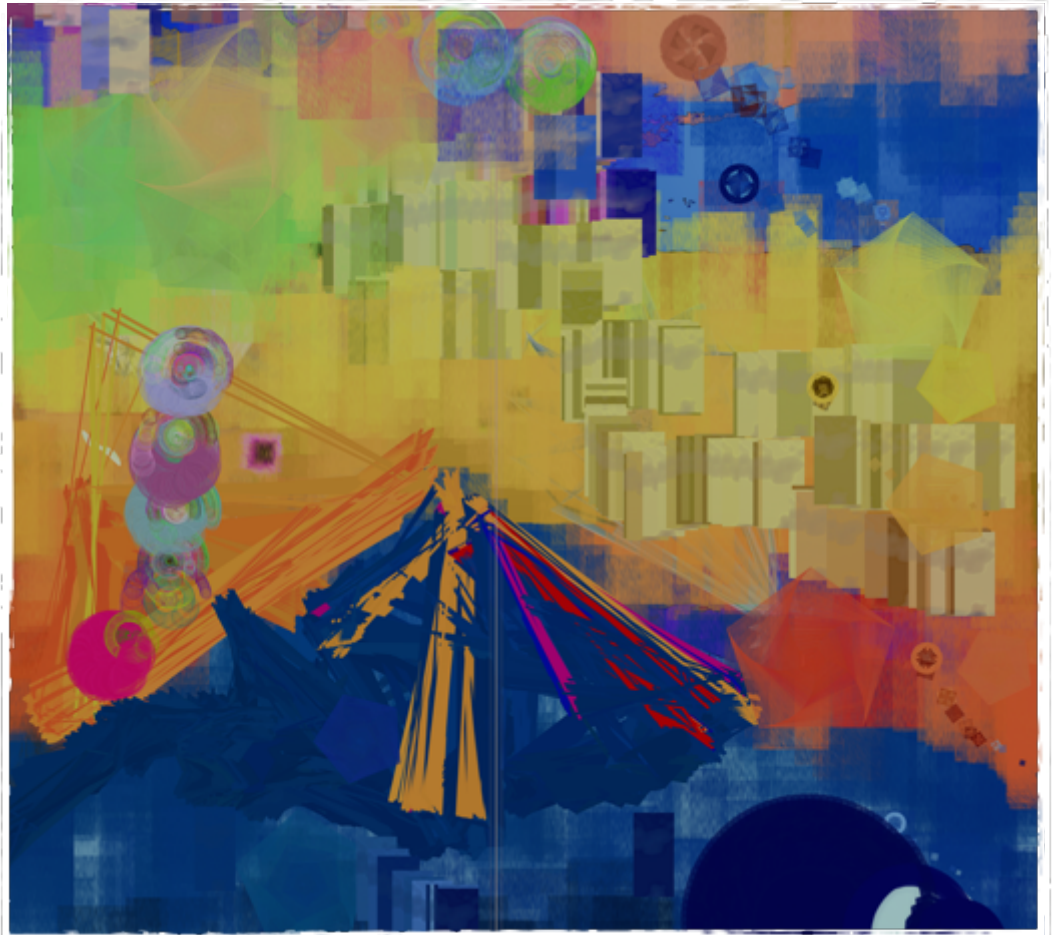


VOLUME
28.1
(2020)

Between the Keys



A publication of the JALT Materials Writers Special Interest Group

The Materials Writers SIG was established for the purpose of helping members to turn fresh teaching ideas into useful classroom materials. We try to be a mutual assistance network, offering information regarding copyright law, sharing practical advice on publishing practices, including self-publication, and suggesting ways to create better language learning materials for general consumption or for individual classroom use.

WWW.MATERIALSWRITERS.ORG



Transitioning from Author to Publisher

Brian Cullen (Nagoya Institute of Technology)

Until the 1980s, the options for authors and teachers to create professional-looking materials for students were quite limited, and creating materials or writing a full textbook manuscript would normally be carried out on a basic typewriter with a single font or even written by hand. While it was feasible for a teacher or author to produce simple learning materials for students, producing a professional textbook that could be marketed and sold was generally left to publishing companies who had the resources to carry out the complex image processing and typesetting that was required.

In 1985, the status quo changed when Aldus released PageMaker which is generally regarded as the first popular desktop publishing software. Adobe purchased Aldus in 1994 and continues to dominate the desktop publishing software industry today, offering professional-level functionality for a relatively low price through their Creative Suite including InDesign (page layout), Illustrator (vector graphic editing), Photoshop (photo editing), and many other applications. Today, teachers and authors can use these Adobe products, Apple's Pages, or even Microsoft Word to produce professional-looking books which combine complex layouts of text and graphics.

Many teachers, including those in the Material Writers SIG, have transitioned from author to publisher and are now selling their materials as well as producing them. This article is based on an interview with one author who has made this transition, Marcos Benevides. He explains some of the events which led to this transition, and a few issues that he has had to address along the way.

Background

Like many teachers who are interested in materials writing, Marcos has been developing materials for his own classes for as long as he has been teaching. In the beginning of his teaching career, he was “not a fan of big, glossy, international textbooks,” so he always tried to supplement the texts that he had to use with his own self-made materials. In his M.Ed. program, he was specializing in task-based language teaching, and that became the pedagogical inclination in his materials development work

Marcos began to move beyond supplementing textbooks and into writing materials professionally. He took a sequence of lessons that he had developed with his colleague, Chris Valvona, and developed them into a textbook published by Pearson. This textbook was *Widgets: A task-based course in practical English* (2008). After that, again working with another colleague, Adam Gray, Marcos developed a book for ABAX called *Fiction in Action: Whodunit* (2010) which went on



Marcos Benevides

to win both a British Council ELTon award and the Duke of Edinburgh English Book award, the two top prizes in the field of ELT.

From Author to Editor and Publisher

Clearly, the success of these books and the awards he received gave more credibility to Marcos's work and it enabled him to propose and develop, as series editor, a 30-title graded reader series for McGraw-Hill (2012). They were adaptations of the classic 80s and 90s *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. The McGraw Hill series did not sell very well, so Marcos decided to start his own publishing company in 2014, Atama-ii Books, in order to publish his own multiple-path series which *has* been successful. Many writers transition from author to publisher without ever having worked with a professional publishing company. It is clear in Marcos's case that his experience in working with other professionals in the publishing industry helped him to produce higher quality books. His learning curve followed the transition from writer of supplementary materials, to textbook author, to editor, and finally to becoming a publisher whose display booths can often be seen at language teaching conferences all over Japan.

Building on Past Achievements

Recently, Marcos has been focused on the second edition of *Widgets*, now called *Widgets Inc.: A task-based course in workplace English* (2018). After ten years of publishing the book, Pearson was not interested in a second edition, so Marcos and Chris negotiated and got back the rights to the book. Subsequently, they published it themselves through Atama-ii Books. The new edition also won the ELTon for course innovation—which was particularly satisfying for both authors, as it was their “first baby.”

It was at this point that the transition from author to publisher became clearer. The second edition of *Widgets* was a major undertaking for Marcos, since—unlike the first time around—the authors who had now become the publisher were now responsible for all aspects of production. Atama-ii Books had to arrange for everything from design to layout, from editing to trialing, and from video production to website design. Marcos notes that “it would have truly been impossible to tackle something of this magnitude without the prior experience we'd had working on other projects with bigger publishers. I'm still a bit in awe that we managed to pull it off, to be perfectly honest.”

For Marcos as an author, the most interesting thing about *Widgets* was that it is based on an entirely new organizational framework — a task-complexity syllabus. As an explicit and principled task-based course, the authors needed to avoid the traditional grammar-based syllabus, yet still remain practical for wide use in varied classrooms. While bearing the extra responsibilities of a publisher can be a heavy load, it has the advantage that there is no external editorial or marketing team to constrain the vision of the author.

In the current edition of *Widgets*, they achieved their vision by employing a themed approach, which helped them to sequence lessons within the framework of a larger on-going simulation. In *Widgets*, students imagine that they are interns at an exciting international company, and they go through various stages in their training; this informs and connects all coursework in a meaningful way.

As a task-based course, *Widgets* also employs outcomes-based assessment, which is equally difficult to implement in a commercial course. In short, it means that assessment must be based primarily on whether a task outcome is achieved adequately enough to be viable in a real-world-like context; that is, it must not be based simply on accuracy, prescribed lexis, and so on, as is the case with traditional assessment. Marcos says, “there are so many aspects of *Widgets* that make it different from other coursebooks that it is difficult to pick out just one or two.” By taking the role of both author and publisher, Marcos certainly took on additional duties, but it also allowed the book to have the freedom to develop in directions that would probably not have been permitted by the editorial team at a large publishing company.

A Balancing Act

As can be imagined, managing these different roles can be quite a balancing act. With the *Widgets* project in particular, he notes that “the sheer scale and the fact that we were doing it ourselves was overwhelming at times. But at least in this case we could rely on previous experience, and the fact that, as a second edition, *Widgets* would be a smaller financial risk than a brand-new title. Still, it was important to us that the book ends up as good or better than anything by a major publisher, so we were careful to not cut any corners.”

There is always a temptation for small publishers to want to cut costs, for example, by carrying out layout, or designing covers or internal graphics themselves even if they lack professional design expertise. In many cases, this results in a product that looks and feels less professional than those of major publishers. In turn, the book then gets less interest than it deserves, and thus fails to get traction. Marcos recognizes this potential pitfall, and although he is quite proficient with graphic design, he will still “force myself to back off and hire a pro designer when needed—which is nearly always. We did this with *Widgets*, and I think the focus on production value shows.”

Marcos reminds us not to underestimate the value that is brought to any project by a diverse team of professionals. We all realize, I would hope, that a good editor is indispensable to any writing project—but equally so are a good designer, illustrator, audio and/or video crew, and a team of advisors and teachers willing to pilot our materials in their classrooms. Not to mention as well, the importance of post-production and a strong sales and promotion team.

Marcos and Atama-ii books have clearly learned a lot during the transition from teacher to author to publisher, and he is able to see that his roles do not always necessarily work smoothly with each other. He says that “writers sometimes tend to have the attitude that if an idea is good, then the rest maybe doesn’t matter all that much. The idea *does* have to be good... but there is so much else that also goes into creating successful materials than simply the idea itself.” For anyone else considering the same kind of transition, he recommends that they be willing to “pay for—and then pay attention to—the work that a good, experienced team brings to a project. ELT materials are a whole package; it’s not just the writing that matters.”

Perhaps the biggest thing that comes through Marcos’s experience is the need for us all to keep learning. Writing a textbook is not a one-shot process, but rather a process that can

continue over 10 years or more, and the nature of the author's role may change considerably. Textbooks go through multiple editions, publishing companies go through editorial and marketing changes, and an author who wants to transition into publishing needs to keep growing and learning in order to keep up with the technical demands of the many aspects of both materials creation and publishing.

This interview was conducted in November 2019. For an overview of Widgets Inc., readers can visit widgepedia.com. Details of the Choose Your Own Adventure series are available at the Atama-ii website: <http://www.atama-ii.com/>.