

Didn't do the reading? With digital textbooks, your professor can prove it



"I forgot how fun it was to read a school textbook."

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There exists a textbook that will report back to your professors about whether you've been reading it, according to a report Tuesday from the *New York Times*. A startup named CourseSmart now offers an education package to schools that allows professors to, among other things, monitor what their students read in course textbooks as well as passages they highlight.

CourseSmart acts as a provider of digital textbooks working with publishers like McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and John Wiley and Sons. The *NY Times* describes books in use at Texas A&M University, which present an "engagement index" to professors that can be used to evaluate students' performance in class.

The article cites a couple of examples where professors attribute students' low grades to the CourseSmart-provided proof that the student never, or rarely, opened their

books. The engagement index shows not only what, but when, students are reading, so if they opt not to peruse the textbook until the day or night before a test, the professor will know.

Students know that the books are tracking them, but it's still unclear to all parties involved whether the "engagement index" is a fair or valuable metric. If nothing else, it could be gamed, and it makes assumptions about optimal learning styles. Some students, for instance, may get more out of homework assignments involving working out problems or out of the class itself, while a well-thumbed digital textbook could just as easily be an indicator of a clueless student frantically trying to catch up on hours they spent sleeping or spacing out while the professor was speaking at them.

The *NY Times* states that CourseSmart is set to broadly introduce the program this coming fall.