

New Copyright Law for Distance Education: The Meaning and Importance of the TEACH Act

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Introduction: The New Legislation

Of great importance to the use of new technologies in innovative education, on October 3rd, 2002 Congress enacted the “Technology, Education and Copyright Harmonization Act,” commonly known as the “TEACH Act.” The President is expected to sign the legislation very soon. Long anticipated by educators and librarians, the new law will demand a full reconsideration of the ability to use existing copyright-protected materials in distance education. The law is a complete revision of the current Section 110(2) of the U.S. Copyright Act, and one of its fundamental objectives is to strike a balance between protecting copyrighted works, while permitting educators to use those materials in distance education. If educators remain within the boundaries of the law, they may use certain copyrighted works without permission from, or payment of royalties to, the copyright owner—and without copyright infringement.

The new law offers many improvements over the previous version of Section 110(2), but in order to enjoy its advantages, colleges, universities, and other qualified educational institutions will need to meet the law’s rigorous requirements. Educators will not be able to comply by either accidental circumstances or well-meaning intention. Instead, the law calls on each educational institution to undertake numerous procedures and involve the active participation of many individuals.

This paper principally summarizes the new standards and requirements established by the TEACH Act. The statutory language itself is often convoluted and does not necessarily flow gracefully. This paper accordingly isolates the various requirements and benefits of the new law and organizes them in a manner that may be helpful to educators and others seeking to understand and comply with the law. This paper will also suggest strategies and implementation methods that an educational institution may choose to follow. In general, this paper will outline the benefits of the TEACH Act and organize the law's requirements into three groups of duties that may be assigned to three divisions within a college or university for implementation: duties of institutional policymakers; duties of information technology officials; and duties of faculty members or other instructional staff. In this multifaceted process, librarians will also find an important role.

Background of Copyright Law

To understand the magnitude of the issues at stake, one needs to comprehend not only the growth of distance education, but also the expansion of copyright protection. Much of the material used in educational programs—in the classroom or through “transmission”—is protected under copyright law. Copyright protection vests automatically in nearly all works that are “original works of authorship” and “fixed in any tangible medium of expression” (Section 102(a)). Hence, most writings, images, artworks, videotapes, musical works, sound recordings, motion pictures, computer programs, and other works are protected by copyright law. That protection applies even if the work lacks any form of “copyright notice” and is not registered with the U.S. Copyright Office. Some works are in the “public domain” and do not have copyright protection. For example, works of the U.S. government are generally barred from copyright protection, and the copyrights on other works eventually expire. Copyrights today usually last through the life of the author, plus seventy years. Quite simply, the law protects vast quantities of works for many, many years.

When educators use any of these works in their teaching, they are using copyright-protected materials. Among the rights of copyright owners are rights to make copies and rights to make public performances and public displays of the works. An assembled—or even dispersed—group of students may well constitute the “public” under the law. Consequently, educators frequently incur possible violations of owners' rights whenever they copy materials as handouts, upload works to websites, “display” slides or other still images, or “perform” music, videos, and other works. In the context of traditional, face-to-face teaching, educators long have debated the application of “fair use” to making copies, and the Copyright Act since 1976 has included a relatively simple and broad provision allowing “performances” and “displays” in the face-to-face classroom setting (Section 110(1)). The rules for distance education, however, are significantly different. Both the meaning of fair use and the details of the specific statute

(Section 110(2)) become much more rigorous when the materials are uploaded to websites, transmitted anywhere in the world, and are easily downloaded, altered, or further transmitted by students and other users—all posing possible threats to the interests of copyright owners.

Context of Distance Education

Comprehending the practical implications of the new legislation also requires understanding the congressional vision of “distance education” and the relationship between educators and the institution. The TEACH Act is a clear signal that Congress recognizes the importance of distance education, the significance of digital media, and the need to resolve copyright clashes. The new law is, nevertheless, built around a vision that distance education should occur in discrete installments, each within a confined span of time, and with all elements integrated into a cohesive lecture-like package.

In other words, much of the law is built around permitting uses of copyrighted works in the context of “mediated instructional activities” that are akin in many respects to the conduct of traditional classroom sessions. The law anticipates that students will access each “session” within a prescribed time period and will not necessarily be able to store the materials or review them later in the academic term; faculty will be able to include copyrighted materials, but usually only in portions or under conditions that are analogous to conventional teaching and lecture formats. Stated more bluntly, this law is not intended to permit scanning and uploading of full or lengthy works, stored on a website, for students to access throughout the semester—even for private study in connection with a formal course.

The TEACH Act suggests another general observation: Many provisions focus entirely on the behavior of educational institutions, rather than the actions of instructors. Consequently, the institution must impose restrictions on access, develop new policy, and disseminate copyright information. The institution is allowed to retain limited copies for limited purposes, but the statute indicates nothing about whether the individual instructor may keep a copy of his or her own instructional program. Most important, educational institutions are probably at greater risk than are individuals of facing infringement liability, and individual instructors will most likely turn to their institutions for guidance about the law. These circumstances will probably motivate institutions to become more involved with oversight of educational programs and the selection and use of educational materials. This substantive oversight may raise sensitive and important issues of academic freedom.

One consequence of these developments is apparent: The pursuit and regulation of distance-education programs will become increasingly centralized within our educational institutions. Because the law calls for institutional

policymaking, implementation of technological systems, and meaningful distribution of copyright information, colleges and universities may well require that all programs be transmitted solely on centralized systems that meet the prescribed standard. Because the law permits uses of only certain copyrighted materials, institutions will feel compelled to assure that faculty are apprised of the limits, and some colleges and universities will struggle with whether to monitor the content of the educational programming.

Some news announcements anticipating the TEACH Act have suggested that the use of materials in distance education will be on a par with the broad rights of performance and display allowed in the face-to-face classroom. This characterization of the law neglects the many differences between the relevant statutes. In the traditional classroom, the Copyright Act long has allowed instructors to “perform” or “display” copyrighted works with few restrictions (Section 110(1)). By contrast, both the previous and the new versions of the statute applicable to distance education are replete with conditions, limits, and restrictions. Make no mistake: While the TEACH Act is a major improvement over the previous version of Section 110(2), the law still imposes numerous requirements for distance education that reach far beyond the modest limits in the traditional classroom.

Benefits of the TEACH Act

The primary benefit of the TEACH Act for educators is its repeal of the earlier version of Section 110(2), which was drafted principally in the context of closed-circuit television. That law permitted educators to “perform” only certain types of works and generally allowed transmissions to be received only in classrooms and similar locations. These restrictions, and others, usually meant that the law could seldom apply to the context of modern, digital transmissions that might utilize a range of materials and need to reach students at home, at work, and elsewhere. The new version of Section 110(2) offers these explicit improvements:

Expanded range of allowed works. The new law permits the display and performance of nearly all types of works. The law no longer sweepingly excludes broad categories of works, as did the former law. However, a few narrow classes of works remain excluded, and uses of some types of works are subject to quantity limitations.

Expansion of receiving locations. The former law limited the transmission of content to classrooms and other similar location. The new law has no such constraint. Educational institutions may now reach students through distance education at any location.

Storage of transmitted content. The former law often permitted educational institutions to record and retain copies of the distance-education

transmission, even if it included copyrighted content owned by others. The new law continues that possibility. The law also explicitly allows retention of the content and student access for a brief period of time, and it permits copying and storage that is incidental or necessary to the technical aspects of digital transmission systems.

Digitizing of analog works. In order to facilitate digital transmissions, the law permits digitization of some analog works, but in most cases only if the work is not already available in digital form.

None of these benefits, however, is available to educators unless they comply with the many and diverse requirements of the law. The rights of use are also often limited to certain works, in limited portions, and only under rigorously defined conditions. The remainder of this paper examines those requirements.

Requirements of the TEACH Act

This paper groups the law's many new requirements according to the unit within the institution that will likely be responsible for addressing or complying with each.

Duties of Institutional Policymakers

1. *Accredited nonprofit institution.* The benefits of the TEACH Act apply only to a "government body or an accredited nonprofit educational institution." In the case of post-secondary education, an "accredited" institution is "as determined by a regional or national accrediting agency recognized by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation or the United States Department of Education." Elementary and secondary schools "shall be as recognized by the applicable state certification or licensing procedures." Most familiar educational institutions will meet this requirement, but many private entities—such as for-profit subsidiaries of nonprofit institutions—may not be duly "accredited."

2. *Copyright policy.* The educational institution must "institute policies regarding copyright," although the language does not detail the content of those policies. The implication from the context of the statute, and from the next requirement about "copyright information," suggests that the policies would specify the standards educators and others will follow when incorporating copyrighted works into distance education. For most educational institutions, policy development is a complicated process, involving lengthy deliberations and multiple levels of review and approval. Such formal policymaking might be preferable, but informal procedural standards that effectively guide relevant activities may well satisfy the statutory requirement. In any event, proper authorities within the educational institution need to take deliberate and concerted action.

3. *Copyright information.* The institution must “provide informational materials” regarding copyright, and in this instance the language specifies that the materials must “accurately describe, and promote compliance with, the laws of United States relating to copyright.” These materials must be provided to “faculty, students, and relevant staff members.” Some of this language is identical to a statutory requirement that educational institutions might already meet regarding their potential liability as an “online service provider.” In any event, the responsibility to prepare and disseminate copyright information is clear; institutions might consider developing websites, distributing printed materials, or tying the information to the distance-education program, among other possible strategies.

4. *Notice to students.* In addition to the general distribution of informational materials, the statute further specifies that the institution must provide “notice to students that materials used in connection with the course may be subject to copyright protection.” While the information materials described in the previous section appear to be more substantive resources detailing various aspects of copyright law, the “notice” to students may be a brief statement simply alerting the reader to copyright implications. The notice could be included on distribution materials in the class or perhaps on an opening frame of the distance-education course. Taking advantage of electronic delivery capabilities, the educational materials may include a brief “notice” about copyright, with an active link to more general information resources.

5. *Enrolled students.* The transmission of content must be made “solely for . . . students officially enrolled in the course for which the transmission is made.” The next session will examine the technological restrictions on access, but in addition, the law also requires that the transmission be “for” only these specific students. Thus, it should not be broadcast for other purposes, such as promoting the college or university, generally edifying the public, or sharing the materials with colleagues at other institutions. Educators might address this requirement through technological restrictions on access, as mentioned in the following section.

Duties of Information Technology Officials

1. *Limited access to enrolled students.* The new law calls upon the institution to limit the transmission to students enrolled in the particular course “to the extent technologically feasible.” Therefore, the institution may need to create a system that permits access only by students registered for that specific class. As a practical matter, the statute may lead educational institutions to implement technological access controls that are linked to enrollment records available from the registrar’s office.

2. *Technological controls on storage and dissemination.* While the transmission of distance education content may be conducted by diverse

technological means, an institution deploying “digital transmissions” must apply technical measures to prevent “retention of the work in accessible form by recipients of the transmission . . . for longer than the class session.” The statute offers no clarification about the meaning of a “class session,” but language throughout the statute suggests that any given transmission would require a finite amount of time, and students would be unable to access it after a designated time. Also, in the case of “digital transmissions,” the institution must apply “technological measures” to prevent recipients of the content from engaging in “unauthorized further dissemination of the work in accessible form.” Both of these restrictions address concerns from copyright owners that students might receive, store, and share the copyrighted content. Both of these provisions of the statute call upon the institution to implement technological controls on methods for delivery, terms of accessibility, and realistic abilities for students to download or share copyrighted content. These provisions specifically demand application of “technological measures” that would restrict uses of the content “in the ordinary course of their operations.” In other words, when the restrictive controls are used in an “ordinary” manner, they will safeguard against unauthorized reproduction and dissemination. This language apparently protects the institution, should someone “hack” the controls and circumvent imperfect technology.

3. *Interference with technological measures.* If the content transmitted through “digital transmissions” includes restrictive codes or other embedded “management systems” to regulate storage or dissemination of the works, the institution may not “engage in conduct that could reasonably be expected to interfere with [such] technological measures.” While the law does not explicitly impose an affirmative duty on educational institutions, each institution is probably well advised as a practical matter to review their technological systems to assure that systems for delivery of distance education do not interrupt digital rights management code or other technological measures used by copyright owners to control their works.

4. *Limited temporary retention of copies.* The statute explicitly exonerates educational institutions from liability that may result from most “transient or temporary storage of material.” On the other hand, the statute does not allow anyone to maintain the copyrighted content “on the system or network” for availability to the students “for a longer period than is reasonably necessary to facilitate the transmissions for which it was made.” Moreover, the institution may not store or maintain the material on a system or network where it may be accessed by anyone other than the “anticipated recipients.”

5. *Limited long-term retention of copies.* The TEACH Act also amended Section 112 of the Copyright Act, addressing the issue of so-called “ephemeral recordings.” The new Section 112(f)(1) explicitly allows educational institutions to retain copies of their digital transmissions that include copyrighted materials pursuant to Section 110(2), provided that no further copies are made from those

works, except as allowed under Section 110(2), and such copies are used “solely” for transmissions pursuant to Section 110(2). As a practical matter, Congress seems to have envisioned distance education as a process of installments, each requiring a specified time period, and the content may thereafter be placed in storage and outside the reach of students. The institution may, however, retrieve that content for future uses consistent with the new law. Incidentally, the TEACH Act did not repeal the earlier language of Section 112 that generally allowed educational institutions to keep some copies, such as videotapes, of educational transmissions for a limited period of time.

Duties of Instructors

Thus far, most duties and restrictions surveyed in this examination of the TEACH Act have focused on responsibilities of the institution and its policymakers and technology supervisors. None of the details surveyed so far, however, begins to address any parameters on the substantive content of the distance-education program. Under traditions of academic freedom, most such decisions are left to faculty members who are responsible for their own courses at colleges and universities. Consequently, to the extent that the TEACH Act places restrictions on substantive content and the choice of curricular materials, those decisions are probably best left to the instructional faculty. Faculty members are best positioned to optimize academic freedom and to determine course content. Indeed, the TEACH Act does establish numerous detailed limits on the choice of content for distance education. Again, the issue here is the selection of content from among copyrighted works that an instructor is seeking to use without permission from the copyright owner.

1. *Works explicitly allowed.* Previous law permitted displays of any type of work, but allowed performances of only “nondramatic literary works” and “nondramatic musical works.” Many dramatic works were excluded from distance education, as were performances of audiovisual materials and sound recordings. The law was problematic at best. The TEACH Act expands upon existing law in several important ways. The new law now explicitly permits:

- Performances of nondramatic literary works;
- Performances of nondramatic musical works;
- Performances of any other work, including dramatic works and audiovisual works, but only in “reasonable and limited portions”; and
- Displays of any work “in an amount comparable to that which is typically displayed in the course of a live classroom session.”

2. *Works explicitly excluded.* A few categories of works are specifically left outside the range of permitted materials under the TEACH Act. The following materials may not be used:

- Works that are marketed “primarily for performance or display as part of mediated instructional activities transmitted via digital networks”; and
- Performances or displays given by means of copies “not lawfully made and acquired” under the U.S. Copyright Act, if the educational institution “knew or had reason to believe” that they were not lawfully made and acquired.

The first of these limitations is clearly intended to protect the market for commercially available educational materials. For example, specific materials are available through an online database, or marketed in a format that may be delivered for educational purposes through “digital” systems, the TEACH Act generally steers users to those sources, rather than allowing educators to digitize the upload their own copies.

3. *Instructor oversight.* The statute mandates the instructor’s participation in the planning and conduct of the distance education program and the educational experience as transmitted. An instructor seeking to use materials under the protection of the new statute must adhere to the following requirements:

- The performance or display “is made by, at the direction of, or under the actual supervision of an instructor”;
- The materials are transmitted “as an integral part of a class session offered as a regular part of the systematic, mediated instructional activities” of the educational institution; and
- The copyrighted materials are “directly related and of material assistance to the teaching content of the transmission.”

The requirements share a common objective: to assure that the instructor is ultimately in charge of the uses of copyrighted works and that the materials serve educational pursuits and are not for entertainment or any other purpose. A narrow reading of these requirements may also raise questions about the use of copyrighted works in distance-education programs aimed at community service or continuing education. While that reading of the statute might be rational, it would also be a serious hindrance on the social mission of educational institutions.

4. *Mediated instructional activities.* In perhaps the most convoluted language of the bill, the statute directs that performances and displays, involving a “digital transmission,” must be in the context of “mediated instructional activities.” This language means that the uses of materials in the program must be “an integral part of the class experience, controlled by or under the actual supervision of the instructor and analogous to the type of performance or display that would take place in a live classroom setting.” In the same provision, the statute specifies that “mediated instructional activities” do not encompass uses of textbooks and other materials “which are typically purchased or acquired by the students.” The point of this language is to prevent an instructor from including, in a digital transmission,

copies of materials that are specifically marketed for and meant to be used by students outside of the classroom in the traditional teaching model. For example, the law is attempting to prevent an instructor from scanning and uploading chapters from a textbook in lieu of having the students purchase that material for their own use. The provision is clearly intended to protect the market for materials designed to serve the educational marketplace. Not entirely clear is the treatment of other materials that might ordinarily constitute handouts in class or reserves in the library. However, the general provision allowing displays of materials in a quantity similar to that which would be displayed in the live classroom setting (“mediated instructional activity”) would suggest that occasional, brief handouts—perhaps including entire short works—may be permitted in distance education, while reserves and other outside reading may not be proper materials to scan and display under the auspices of the new law.

5. *Converting analog materials to digital formats.* Troublesome to many copyright owners was the prospect that their analog materials would be converted to digital formats, and hence made susceptible to easy downloading and dissemination. Some copyright owners have held steadfast against permitting digitization in order to control uses of their copyrighted materials. The TEACH Act includes a prohibition against the conversion of materials from analog into digital formats, except under the following circumstances:

- The amount that may be converted is limited to the amount of appropriate works that may be performed or displayed, pursuant to the revised Section 110(2); and
- A digital version of the work is not “available to the institution,” or a digital version is available, but it is secured behind technological protection measures that prevent its availability for performing or displaying in the distance-education program consistent with Section 110(2).

These requirements generally mean that educators must take two steps before digitizing an analog work. First, they need to confirm that the exact material converted to digital format is within the scope of materials and “portion” limitations permitted under the new law. Second, educators need to check for digital versions of the work available from alternative sources and assess the implications of access restrictions, if any.

Role for Librarians

Nothing in the TEACH Act mentions duties of librarians, but the growth and complexity of distance education throughout the country have escalated the need for innovative library services. Fundamentally, librarians have a mission centered on the management and dissemination of information resources. Distance education is simply another form of exactly that pursuit. More pragmatically, distance education has stirred greater need for reserve services and interlibrary

loans in order to deliver information to students in scattered locations. Librarians are also often the principal negotiators of licenses for databases and other materials; those licenses may grant or deny the opportunity to permit access to students located across campus or around the world.

Within the framework of the TEACH Act, librarians may find many new opportunities to shape distance-education programs, such as:

- Librarians may participate in the development of copyright policy, including policies on fair use that long have been of central importance to library services.
- Librarians may take the lead in preparing and gathering copyright information materials for the university community. Those materials may range from a collection of books to an innovative website linking materials of direct relevance.
- Librarians may retain in the library collections copies of distance-education transmissions that the institution may make and hold consistent with the law. In turn, the librarians will need to develop collection policies, usage guidelines, and retention standards consistent with limits in the law.
- Many materials used in distance education will come from the library collections, and librarians may be called upon to locate and deliver to educators proper materials to include in the transmissions. Librarians may need to evaluate materials based on the allowable content limits under the law.
- Librarians often negotiate the licenses for acquisition of many materials. To the extent that the law imposes undesirable restrictions, the librarians are in a position to negotiate necessary terms of use at the time of making the acquisition.
- Librarians have many opportunities for offering alternative access to content that cannot be included lawfully in the distance-education programming. When materials may not be lawfully scanned and uploaded, the library may respond with expanded reserve services, or enhanced database access, or simply purchasing alternative formats or multiple copies of needed works.
- Librarians long have recognized the importance of fair use and often have the best grasp of the doctrine. Librarians are usually best positioned to interpret and apply fair use to situations and needs not encompassed by the rigorous details of the TEACH Act.
- Librarians may research and track developments related to the TEACH Act, including policies, information resources, and operating procedures implemented at other educational institutions. That effort can allow one university to learn from others, in order to explore the meaning of the law and to consider options for compliance.

Conclusion

The TEACH Act is an opportunity, but it is also a responsibility. The new law is a benefit, but also a burden. Implementing the law and enjoying its benefits will be possible only with concerted action by many parties within the educational institution. Because of the numerous conditions, and the limitations on permitted activities, many uses of copyrighted works that may be desirable or essential for distance education may simply be barred under the terms of the TEACH Act. Educators should seek to implement the TEACH Act, but they should also be prepared for exploring alternatives when the new law does not yield a satisfactory result. Among those alternatives:

- Employing alternative methods for delivering materials to students, including the expansion of diverse library services, as noted above.
- Securing permission from the copyright owners for the use of materials beyond the limits of the law.
- Applying the law of fair use, which may allow uses beyond those detailed in the TEACH Act.

One objective of the TEACH Act is to offer a right of use with relative clarity and certainty. Like many other such specific provisions in the Copyright Act, the new statutory language is tightly limited. An ironic result is that fair use—with all of its uncertainty and flexibility—becomes of growing importance. Indeed, reports and studies leading to the drafting and passage of the new law have made clear that fair use continues to apply to the scanning, uploading, and transmission of copyrighted materials for distance education, even after enactment of the TEACH Act. A close examination of fair use is outside the scope of this particular paper, but fair use as applied to distance education will be the subject of further studies supported by the American Library Association.