

Developing Instructional Materials in the Sloan Experiment

RUTH HILLIS SEAY

Purposes to be served by new instructional materials should determine the procedures used in their development. Ruth Hillis Seay wrote the Springville Series referred to in this article while a staff member of the Sloan Experiment in Kentucky, College of Education, University of Kentucky.

WHAT would happen if schools, serving communities where unrealized opportunities exist, built the major part of their programs around the three economic necessities of food, shelter and clothing? Would economic information applied to the problems of low-income families improve economic conditions for those families? Questions such as these were asked in 1939 by an economist, an educator and the head of a foundation interested in economic education and research. In order to find answers, they set up a "Project in Applied Economics" which has come to be known as the Sloan Experiment. Three universities have participated in the project—University of Kentucky, University of Florida and University of Vermont.

During the first year of the experiment, a need for special instructional materials was recognized. Textbooks already in use in schools of Kentucky, Florida and Vermont offered little specific, usable information about food, shelter and clothing. Free or inexpensive pamphlets and bulletins, although they sometimes contained valuable information for a state as a whole, were difficult to read. Little material of any

kind could be found concerning actual problems of communities and their local resources. Obviously any school program emphasizing the three economic necessities would be handicapped by lack of readable, pertinent information. Those who were guiding the Sloan Experiment decided that a major emphasis should be the preparation and evaluation of new instructional materials focused upon problems of food, shelter and clothing and the local resources available for solution of such problems. These materials were in addition to those already available.

The staff in charge of the experiment in each of the three states set up its own plan independently for preparation and evaluation of the new instructional materials. A few characteristics are common, however, to all of the Sloan materials. For example, the books have been written for specific communities by people who knew those communities. They have been written and illustrated by non-professional writers and artists. They have been produced as inexpensively as was considered feasible. They have been subjected to some kind of evaluation in terms of their original purposes.

PROCESS USED IN DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

For a closer view of one process used in developing a set of Sloan materials, we shall look at the preparation and evaluation of the series which came to be known as the Springville Series, published by the University of Kentucky. This process falls roughly into five parts: (1) selecting a theme, (2) setting up criteria to serve as a guide in preparation of new instructional materials and as a basis for evaluation, (3) preparing first drafts of the materials, (4) trying out the materials and (5) revising the materials for general use.

Selecting a Theme

A tentative theme for the new series—community agencies which help people solve problems of food, shelter and clothing—had been suggested by teachers and staff members of the experiment. General observations had indicated a need for instructional materials with this theme. Before adopting the suggested theme, however, a careful examination was made of eight social studies textbooks already being used by pupils for whom the new series was to be prepared. The study of the textbooks revealed a startling scarcity of information. Only 9.2 per cent of the combined total of words in the eight textbooks referred in any way to community agencies or to food, shelter or clothing. Less than .03 per cent of the total words provided information on the kind of help that community agencies are able to give on food, shelter and clothing problems. Moreover, much of the information which

was available did not apply to modern times or to the region in which the pupils of Kentucky lived. The information was frequently difficult for these pupils to read and understand because it contained unfamiliar words and technical terms that were poorly explained. Finally, the information was difficult to use. Pupils were given a few general facts about community agencies—facts which bore little relation to the pupils' own experiences.

The study of the textbooks not only decided the question of the theme to be used, but it indicated the type of information which would best supplement that already available in the textbooks. Plans proceeded rapidly. Some content on food, shelter and clothing would be included in the materials, but the major emphasis would be on community agencies that are active in rural communities in the southeastern part of the United States. For example, each agency would be described in enough detail to acquaint pupils with its origin, purposes and organization. Its services would be described as they actually help people in a rural community solve their food, shelter and clothing problems. And the way in which an individual can secure help from each agency would be clearly explained.

Setting Up Criteria

What standards should be used to guide the actual writing of the materials? At this point the experience of others was relied upon most heavily. Other Sloan materials had been tested and retested by use in different schools and much had been learned from the reactions of pupils and teachers who

used them. That experience showed that pupils and teachers cooperating with the Sloan Experiment preferred information in story form. Teachers reported that pupils improved their reading habits as they used material that was interesting and easy to read. Teachers also asked for information that would help answer their pupils' questions about their own communities.

Professional literature on instructional materials also was helpful. Characteristics of good materials were listed as they were found in reports of research. From these findings, criteria were selected. Four experienced teachers, who were well acquainted with the needs and interests of the pupils for whom the new Sloan materials were to be prepared, checked and revised the criteria. The following criteria were then agreed upon and were used as a master guide throughout the preparation and evaluation of the Springville Series.

- The informational content is related to the experience of the pupil.
- The pupil is conscious of a need for the information which the material offers.
- The information is adequate for use by the pupil.
- The material is well organized.
- The style of writing is clear and comprehensible.
- The vocabulary is suitable to the age and grade level of the pupil and to the subject matter of the text.
- Technical terms or unfamiliar words necessary to the content are explained as they are introduced.
- Useful study-helpers accompany the text.

- The following interest factors are present: people, story form, action, humor and a life-like situation.

Writing the New Materials

Actual writing of the new materials was only part of the job of preparing first drafts. Information about community agencies had to be collected. A search for this information in printed form revealed that little had been written about community agencies. Some agencies had published many pamphlets as part of their service to the public. Such publications, however, did not contain information about the agencies themselves. Therefore, facts concerning the organization and work of each agency were gathered by means of personal interviews with one or more representatives of each agency. These facts were woven into a series of six stories about the people of Springville, an imaginary community in the rural county of Forest, also imaginary. The Caudill family, however, and the Andersons, the Simpsons and the Bentleys could easily have lived in any rural community in Kentucky.

Following the practice that had already proved successful in the Sloan Experiment, one member of the staff carried the major responsibility for gathering the information, planning the stories and doing the writing. Other members of the Sloan Experiment staff and many members of the University staff gave help where it was needed. Representatives of community agencies checked the first drafts of the stories for accuracy of the information about their respective agencies. A teacher of public-school art suggested improve-

ments in the stories as she sketched appropriate illustrations.

Teaching suggestions, a glossary and a bibliography were added to each story, and an index to the community agencies described in the series was placed at the end of the sixth story. Manuscripts of the stories were then edited, mimeographed and bound into sets of six small books for use during the tryout period.

Trying Out the Materials

The Springville Series was evaluated by two groups of people,¹ (1) teachers and pupils who used the books in their classrooms during the tryout period and (2) experts in the field of instructional materials. The first group used each book as they thought it would be most helpful to them. In one school an English class used the series as reference material for a community survey it was making. In another school a social studies class used the series as its basic textbook in a semester's course entitled, "Community Living." Two other classes found the series most useful.

In all of the classes, however, pupils gave their reactions to each story soon after they had read it by answering two sets of questions. These questions were intended to discover if the new instructional materials were actually meeting the standards set up in the criteria. The first set of questions applied to all six stories:

- Which parts of the story reminded you of things you have done?
- What information in this story can you use?
- Which parts of the story were easiest to read?
- Which parts of the story were hardest to read?
- Why were these parts hard to read?
- What new words did you learn as you read this story?
- Which of the *Why-Nots* (study-helps) has your class chosen to do? If you have already done some of them, which *Why-Nots* were most helpful?
- Did the story interest you? If so, what made it interesting?

The second set of questions was made to apply to each story specifically. Pupil reactions to this set were obtained through individual interviews. The interviewer asked each pupil the following questions:

- Do these incidents in the story, (Title of book), remind you of things you have done? Of what does it remind you? (A list of the major incidents in the story).
- Can you use information about these topics? How will you use it? (A list of the major topics of information).
- Are the following incidents in (Title of book) interesting to you? Why is it (referring to each incident) interesting? (A list of the incidents containing definite interest factors).

In addition to this pupil evaluation, the teachers rated each of the six books

¹ For a more detailed account of the procedures used in evaluating the Springville Series, see Ruth Hillis, *The Preparation and Evaluation of Instructional Materials on Community Agencies*, Bulletin of the Bur. of School Service, Vol. XXI, No. 2 (Dec. 1948). Lexington: The Univ. of Kentucky.

as "good," "fair" or "poor" in terms of the nine criteria.

The second group, the experts in the field of instructional materials, also rated each of the six books as "good," "fair" or "poor," in terms of the criteria. The experts further assisted the evaluation by stating in their own words their appraisal of each book.

Revising the Materials for General Use

The evaluation showed that two major revisions were needed. The informational content of the stories should be made less difficult to read and the stories should contain more humor to make them meet the standards for interesting narrative that had been set up in the criteria. Other changes or additions suggested by pupils, teachers and experts were studied in terms of their suitability to the original purposes of the materials. Those changes which clearly added to the usefulness, readability and interest were approved and made. Special attention was given to making all the

informational content more readable. Many sections of each story were rewritten in order to lighten the vocabulary load and to simplify difficult sentences and paragraphs. A few humorous incidents were added to the stories. After the manuscripts had been revised, they were again edited.

During the period of revision, the illustrations were completed. Then the revised manuscripts, with the illustrations, were lithoprinted and made available for general use.

The process followed in the preparation of the Springville Series is different from that used in the preparation of other Sloan materials. It differs also from the processes being used by many other agencies preparing special-purpose instructional materials. The process in itself is not the end, but the means to an end. Purposes of new instructional materials determine the procedures used for their development. Only two things can be borrowed from a process already used—suggestions for getting started on the job and the assurance that the job *can* be done.

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