

# The Realities of Choosing and Using Instructional Materials

P. Kenneth Komoski

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*This author maintains that any effort at curriculum change "means a commitment to a good deal of serious in-service training of everyone involved in the process of choosing and using instructional materials."*

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The process of choosing instructional materials and using those materials within a school's curriculum in many ways represents a large proportion of the practical realities of curriculum change. In choosing curriculum materials, a school gives literal and tangible form to the curriculum decisions it has made or has left unmade, for any curriculum decisions left unmade will be made by the materials that are chosen.

Although the process of choosing instructional materials may begin as an exercise in curriculum theory—a sort of social, philosophical, and educational quest—eventually, it must deal with the day-to-day realities of how a particular school system operates. Not the least of these realities is the amount of time and money that the system is able and willing to commit to the process (not simply to the products) of that quest. And because time—particularly teacher-time—means money, an investment in curriculum change

is an increasingly costly one for most school systems. There are still some schools—I visited one not long ago—in which teachers, parents, and administration willingly donate their time to plan a curriculum and to choose the materials needed to carry it out. But today such schools are the exception, not the norm.

In the school I visited, a three-year-old school in New Mexico, the parents had raised one-and-a-half times the school's state-allotted budget for instructional materials to purchase products the teachers had chosen. Clearly, this is not happening in very many schools in these days of austerity budgets and tax revolts. Nor is it necessary to spend one-and-a-half times a school's annual allocation for instructional materials to introduce curriculum change.

However, the costs in teacher and administrator time in this connection cannot be denied, must not be underplayed, and are significant. The "people costs" involved in responsibly choosing and using the materials on which so much of any successful curriculum change will depend are significantly more than the cost of the materials themselves. Too often, this people cost is given short shrift; it is looked at as a sort of necessary evil that a school has to put up with once the "real work" of hammering out the curriculum has been done. But anyone who has faced the realities of curriculum change and attempted to translate that change into classroom practice knows that this is not so.

The "evil" is in fact so necessary to the implementation of curriculum change that, unless a significant commitment is made to the process of choosing and using the instructional materials, the curriculum ultimately practiced in the classroom will end up quite different from the curriculum described by the curriculum office. This is so because the most striking, and to many, the most surprising feature of classroom instruction is the major role played by materials—particularly commercially published materials—in providing both structure and moment-to-moment teaching/learning activities within the classroom.

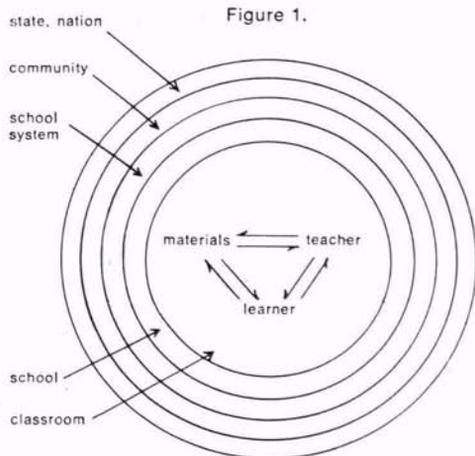
Ongoing research by EPIE Institute on the role of instructional materials in classroom instruction is for the first time providing educators with longitudinal data on the reality of just how much teachers and the curriculum depend on the

materials being used in the nation's classrooms. The baseline data in EPIE's National Survey and Assessment of Instructional Materials (NSAIM)<sup>1</sup>, gathered during 1974-75 from over 12,000 classroom teachers via survey questionnaires, onsite and telephone interviews, and classroom observations of teacher and student use of materials, indicate that instructional materials are used during 90-95 percent of all classroom instruction (K-12).

Another study (Davis, Frymier, and Clinefelter, 1977) reports that 98 percent of the curriculum interactions experienced during an average day by 11-year-olds in fifth-grade classrooms were interactions between the learner and one or more instructional materials. EPIE's NSAIM reports textbooks being used for 65 percent of classroom instructional time; Davis, Frymier, and Clinefelter report 78 percent of curriculum interactions in fifth-grade classrooms as being with textbooks. Both studies report nontextbook materials being used for approximately 30 percent of all other instruction.

Recognizing and reflecting upon these findings can be a sobering exercise for the individuals responsible for curriculum and instruction within a school district or school building. A director of curriculum who does not spend a good deal of time observing what really goes on within the moment-to-moment interactions of classroom learning can quickly lose touch with this fact—that the teacher's ability to carry out effective instruction within the curriculum is dependent upon the availability, the appropriateness, and the understandability of the tangible tools (that is, materials) chosen to implement that curriculum. When this point is fully recognized, reflected upon, and considered in planning curriculum change for a school, it becomes more likely that that planning will produce something worthwhile for that school and for the learners for whom it exists. When it is not recognized and taken into consideration, curriculum change is in trouble.

It is not so much that the curriculum decision-makers don't see this reality, but that for most school people, the implications are too difficult to face because of another more pressing and pressuring reality. This reality is the lack of time, money, and skills needed to search among the ever increasing array of instructional materials for those that *seem appropriate*, to understand



them well enough to choose those *most likely to be appropriate*, and finally, to ascertain that the teachers and learners who will be using those materials will understand and use them well enough to effectively teach and learn with them.

All of these activities are part of a well-conceived and carefully carried out curriculum change, yet they are consistently shortchanged in schools all across the country. The internal budgetary pressures from school boards, teachers' salary-requests, tax revolts, and the external commercial pressures from advertisements and salespersons all tend to short circuit and devalue that process. This is as true for the "back-to-basics" changes of the 1970s as it was for the "forward-to-the-future" curriculum changes of the 1960s. In fact, if anything, schools making the "back-to-basics" trek are apt to pay less attention to the activities of choosing and using appropriate materials because there is a false sense of security in returning to "the old standbys"—which in fact may not stand up under the careful scrutiny they should receive.

A tragic reality is that many schools waste a great deal of time and money engaging in what we at EPIE have labeled "closet curriculum change." The label is prompted by our having

<sup>1</sup> NSAIM was launched by EPIE Institute in 1974 under a grant from the Lilly Endowment of Indianapolis. Its ongoing work is currently being supported by grants from the National Institute of Education and private foundations. See: *EPIE Report: Number 76*, Spring 1976, for a detailed report of baseline data gathered during 1974-75.

identified, in schools all over the country, classroom closets and school storerooms filled with tangible evidence of once-tried and aborted curriculum changes, in the form of curriculum materials once fashionable, but now unused.

In most cases, conversations with teachers in these classrooms corroborate what we suspected—that these closets filled with unused materials are the result of schools having taken shortcuts in the process of choosing and using the tools of change, which prematurely committed the school and its teachers to an instructional product or set of products neither appropriate nor thoroughly understood by those who had to work with them from day-to-day. Thus, what passes for curriculum change in many schools passes rather quickly, leaving the only evidence of its having occurred at all in the recesses of darkened closets and on the balance sheets of publishing companies. This is not to say that those products are necessarily worthless now, nor that they were worthless at the time they were purchased. It is to say that what all the evidence increasingly points to is that the value of an instructional product in a particular school curriculum is directly proportionate to the investment that that school has made in the process of choosing it.

In a recent Michigan study of the cost effectiveness of compensatory education programs, it was found that learners whose teachers had been involved in choosing the math and reading materials used in their classrooms scored significantly higher in achievement than learners whose teachers had not been given the opportunity to choose their own materials, even when the same material was being used by both groups of teachers. This same phenomenon has been found in EPIE's research conducted with the help of a large school district in Illinois.

These findings are particularly provocative in light of EPIE's NSAIM data, indicating that about 45 percent of the 1,200 teachers who responded reported having had no direct involvement in choosing the major materials used in their classrooms. But the involvement of teachers is only one part, albeit an important one, of the total choosing/using process that is so crucial to successful curriculum change. EPIE's national study also points up a serious lack of training and time provided for teachers to effectively choose

materials. In addition, there is a noticeable lack of training and time during which teachers could become thoroughly familiar with a material before they use it with learners. Much of what passes for such training is a glorified sales talk by "a consultant" supplied by the publisher.

Other recent research (much of which has been stimulated by Benjamin Bloom's *Human Characteristics and School Learning*) is pointing to the fact that "time on task" and the quantity and quality of what Rosenshine and Berliner (1977) have labeled "engaged academic time" are crucially important to student learning. One of the things that is most likely to contribute to improving the quality of whatever time the learner spends on task is a high quality, three-way "fit" between the teacher and the materials on the one hand, and the materials and the learner on the other. This high quality teacher-to-materials-to-learner fit is what should lie at the heart or core of the total "choosing/using" process. That is, when materials have been screened through the various curriculum committees functioning at state, local, and school levels, the ultimate (and most important, from the standpoint of student learning) curriculum criteria have yet to be applied. These criteria are implicit in this two-pronged question: Does a given material "fit" the teaching requirements (for example, knowledge, acceptance level, and style) of the teacher, and the learning needs and characteristics of the students who are going to be using it? A grossly simplified representation of the total choosing/using process is shown in Figure 1.

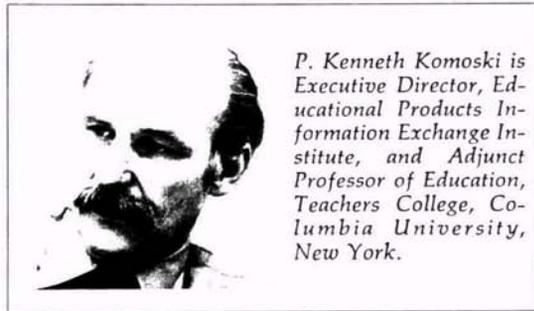
However, the reality that is so neatly represented by this set of concentric circles centering on the teacher-to-materials-to-learner triangular "fit," is never so neat as this. In actuality, the reality of choosing materials differs markedly from state to state, district to district, and school to school. It also differs from classroom to classroom, teacher to teacher, and from learner to learner. But there appears to be enough in common across these differences to give hope that the process can be engaged in more and used effectively nationwide, if there is the commitment on the part of state and local education agencies to provide the necessary time and money to carry the process to its ultimate fulfillment at the school and classroom level.

At present, many state systems are making substantial investments of professional time and talent in seeing to it that the outer circles of the process are receiving proper attention. Many local school systems are investing heavily in attending to some of the inner circles of decision making. But there is ample evidence from teachers in schools across the country that there is little or no level for choice, and that the process is suffering from a *dis-ease* at its "heart."

Given this reality, it is inevitable that any effort at curriculum change, whether at the state, local, or classroom level, is destined for difficulty if it fails to pay attention to what is happening at the very heart of the change that it is attempting to bring about. The longer this "dis-eased" condition is allowed to exist at the core of curriculum change, the longer curriculum change will remain in trouble.

Is there a cure? Well perhaps nothing so sure as a cure, but at least an ameliorating self-therapy. This therapy, as with all therapy, must begin with a strong desire to improve one's condition. In this case, this means a commitment to a good deal of serious in-service training of every-

one involved in the process of choosing and using instructional materials. In school systems where this sort of in-service program has become an ongoing commitment, there is evidence of an increasingly healthy climate within which effective curriculum change can take place. EPIE is currently at work pulling together evidence of such "existence proofs" of what can be done when an appropriate in-service program is built upon an appropriate level of commitment. The results of this effort will be part of an EPIE Report entitled, *Improving the Selection and Use of Instructional Materials: A How to Handbook* that will be available to educators in February 1979. [FL]



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## National Curriculum Study Institutes

Fall 1978

### Learning Styles/Teaching Styles

November 13-14, 1978, New York, New York (Statler Hilton Hotel)

This institute is designed to explore some of the recent research on learning/teaching styles, to examine the research findings for their implications for modifying teaching behaviors and styles and designing curriculum to be more compatible with various learning styles, and to examine some specific educational models that have been developed for diagnosing and responding to teaching/learning styles.

Institute Consultants: *Anthony Gregorc*, Associate Professor of Secondary Education, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut; *Allredo Castañeda*, Professor of Education, Stanford University, Stanford, California; *Kenneth Dunn*, Superintendent of Schools, Hewlett-Woodmere Public Schools, Woodmere, New York; *Rita Dunn*, Professor of Education, St. John's University, Jamaica, New York.

Background materials packet at special discount price—\$18.50

Registration must be received in the ASCD office by Monday, October 30, 1978.

### Clinical Supervision: Adaptions for Schools

December 3-5, 1978, San Diego, California (Holiday Inn Embarcadero)

This institute is intended to develop participants' specific skills in implementing major concepts from

clinical supervision and other derivative models in urban, suburban, rural, public, and private educational settings. Based on a similar highly successful workshop which was held last year, this institute emphasizes skill building through six small group workshops that focus on facts and inference, verbal skills building, values clarification, conferencing, time use, and models of supervision.

The staff includes both academics and practitioners; all staff members will be present for the entire institute. This institute will be limited to 75 participants.

Institute Consultants: *Eric J. Roberts*, Vice-Principal for General Studies, Hillel Academy, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; *David Champagne* (Institute Director) Associate Professor Curriculum and Supervision, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; *Patricia Demase*, Principal, Hamilton-Martin Elementary School, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Background materials packet at special discount price—\$20.00

Registration must be received in the ASCD office by Monday, November 20, 1978.

#### NCSI REGISTRATION FORM

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