How do you evaluate a textbook? What do you look at first? Is there a quick method to show how one textbook differs from another?

For years I have asked these questions of authors, editors, publishing executives, and sales personnel as well as professors, curriculum specialists, and teachers. All have provided insight into the evaluation of textbooks, but the best and most common tool seems to be the skills trace.

A skills trace is a process by which an evaluator isolates one skill and reads every reference listed in the index of the teacher's manual (or scope and sequence chart where the pages are listed). The evaluator then observes how that skill is introduced, taught, practiced, and tested throughout the grades.

Any skill, objective, topic, concept, repeated label, or content strand can be traced. Try a skill that is difficult to teach or learn—sequencing, main idea, fractions, adjectives, summarizing. Or choose a strand that might be easy to isolate and examine—life or study skills, listening, word problems, ecology, map reading. Or trace a repeated label—individual differences, career awareness, suggestions for foreign speaking students.

You will be shocked, amazed, or maybe even pleased by what you find. First, you will see immediately how well the teacher's manual is referenced, which program has included various aids, how well the ancillary materials are correlated, and how much direction is provided for the teacher. You'll also see vast areas of difference in the amount, method, and variety of the instruction, the objectives and their match to instruction and testing, whether the skill progresses in difficulty and if it develops and extends. The list could go on.
let's present a few examples of what you'll uncover through this procedure.

Some programs teach the same lesson repeatedly, grade after grade. For example, in one elementary English program (now out of print), the same lesson on pronouns was taught from grade 2 to grade 6. The only variation was in the size of the print and the number of examples provided. Yet other programs grow and develop, carefully reviewing, explaining, expanding, and gradually combining several skills into broader applications.

An example of a program that progressively develops a skill is found in a reading series that teaches sequencing. The series begins with a picture sequencing task in kindergarten and expands to the ordering of topic sentences and main ideas in the primary grades. At grade six it develops into the sequencing of major events, which are later combined with each other. This procedure ultimately teaches the student how to write a summary: first writing, then combining, major event sentences.

In tracing extension activities, I found many repetitions of the same activity. The only difference between reinforcement and enrichment in one program was whether the students were required to write or say the answers (Enrichment students were required to write).

Beneath these surface discoveries, a skills trace can form the basis of an in-depth study. Since many programs differ most in the method, rate, and amount of instruction, you will want to ask questions that guide your study in those directions. Create, or have your committee create, a questionnaire that reflects your philosophy and focuses on your district's needs and wants. A questionnaire might highlight such points as:

- Are skills taught and mastered before they are applied to the content? Or are they introduced and then directly applied?
- Are students told what they are going to learn, why it is important, or must they infer the purpose for themselves?
- Does the instruction offer some kind of strategy for identifying, using, or comprehending the skills?
- How many and what kind of examples are provided before students are required to work independently?
- Is there alternative instruction when students do not understand?

For this type of analysis, a cut-and-paste method transforms a difficult chore into a fairly simple task of observation and comparison. All lessons, workbook pages, and testing sections can be cut out and pasted on 8 1/2 by 11 sheets of three-hole paper. Each pasted page should be carefully labeled to show the publisher, component (teacher's manual, workbook, ditto, unit test, or end of book test), grade level, and page number, and then placed chronologically in a three-ring binder. This placement reduces an enormous textbook program into an easy-to-read nonbiased document, clearly showing how that skill or strand is developed throughout the entire series.

The cut-and-paste skills trace also provides an opportunity to evaluate the workbook in relation to the textbook. The following questions are adapted from Jean Osborn's "Some Guidelines for Workbook Tasks" (Anderson, Osborn, and Tierney, 1984, pp. 110-111).

- Do workbooks reinforce the instruction in the manual?
- Are directions clear, concise, brief, and easy enough for children to read independently?
- Are there enough practice exercises so students can feel confident they understand the skill being practiced?
- Do examples focus on the most important aspects of the skill being taught?

Another critical area to include in your skills trace is testing. Test items are frequently the weakest part of any textbook program simply because they are so difficult to write. When testing is included in the skills trace, those weaknesses come to the surface.

You will discover programs where lesson objectives and test objectives don't match. You may find tests with only one or two questions. Another common flaw you will quickly spot is a test format that is totally different from the instruction and practice format.

Even more important, however, is whether lessons actually teach what is tested. Could students pass the test after having had the instruction? Or could they pass the test before they had the instruction? (In one program, the pre-tests were ambiguous and difficult, while the mastery tests were obvious and simple.)

When comparing two or three programs, trace the same skill or strand in each program. Circulate these skills trace notebooks among the schools in your district, accompanied with a questionnaire to focus attention on what should be evaluated. In most cases, people will quickly decide which program is most appropriate, or else teachers will be satisfied that two of the three programs, for example, would be acceptable.

What will you do with the notebooks after your study? If you have selected a difficult or challenging skill, the notebooks provide an excellent resource to leave in the teacher's room. They are also useful for explaining your program selection to parents, board members, and others who may question your final selection. One caution: although the skills trace provides valuable and essential information, it should never be the only procedure used to evaluate textbooks. Other columns in this series will address other aspects of textbook selection.

References


Durkin, Dolores. "Is There a Match Between What Elementary Teachers Do and What basal Reader Manuals Recommend?" Center for the Study of Reading, Urbana-Champaign, Reading Education Report No. 12, 1983.
