What Every Textbook Evaluator Should Know

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A publisher's program should not be a district's program; districts must adapt instructional materials to meet their special requirements.

Who selects textbooks in your district? How is the selection made? Do decision makers know how to examine textbooks? Were they ever taught how?

Unfortunately, textbook selection is not always wisely determined. First, many methods for selection are outdated. Because today's textbook is designed to sell, traditional evaluation strategies and questions may no longer be effective (Muther, 1984).

Second, "the average teacher has never been trained to evaluate or to select materials for classroom use" (EPIE, 1976 p. 1). I informally surveyed some teacher training institutions and found that textbook evaluation courses, when taught, are often part of a "materials" course offered at the graduate level. Several professors interviewed were totally unaware of the change in textbooks; they distributed outdated checklists and materials and required students to evaluate these materials and report back to the rest of the class. Rarely were students shown where—and why—textbooks are weak, how they differ, and specifically how to determine which program best matches an identified goal.

Third, many districts are not aware that there is a problem. After all, they've evaluated textbooks for years and have established policies and procedures. Many feel that there are more pressing issues to address.

Confusion surrounds textbook selection today. According to unpublished research by publishers, the primary determiners are pretty pictures, heaps of independent seatwork, and easy-to-use manuals. Yet personable sales people—those who tell jokes, bring doughnuts, and let committees out early—are also highly influential. Publishers who provide the best wine and cheese presentations, free consumable materials, or free "pilots" and accompanying giveaways win many selection decisions. Indeed, offering "the best deal" (usually a combination
of free material) sways 20 to 70 percent of district decisions nationwide according to estimates of several publishing executives. Obviously, exact figures are not available, but "dealing" is just as common in adoption states as in open territories (see Figure 1).

When studies show that 70 to 90 percent of classroom decisions are based on textbooks; that between 30 to 70 percent of classroom time is spent by students working on dittos and workbooks; that less than 1 percent of reading time is spent on instruction in comprehension (Durkin, 1978 p. 21); and that the textbook may be, in some cases, the only book a student ever reads—it seems a crime that any textbook would be selected because of pretty pictures, favorite topics, entertaining sales agents, or "the best deal."

**Textbook Selection**

The process of textbook selection can actually be an easier task than it currently is in many districts. The key to success, however, lies in the identification and description of what you want the program to do and in not deviating from that goal. The more specific the description, the easier the task of finding a textbook program that most closely matches it—or is easiest to fix.

Each selection committee must first define the role the textbook should play in the subject. Should it be used as a reference manual or as the foundation for curriculum? Is it a manual of instruction, or is it the total curriculum?

How your district defines the textbook in a specific subject for specific students used by a specific faculty for an identified goal will not only result in the best program selected for your district; it will also make selection far easier.

To define the textbook's role, you may need to understand some general information about publishers and how textbooks are designed.

**Background on Publishing**

Obviously, the goal of any publisher is to stay in business, and the only way to stay in business is to sell books. Yet today's textbook market has been in decline. Less than 1 percent of the school budget goes toward textbooks materials (American Association of Publishers, 1982), with audiovisual and computers competing for funds (Noble, 1984). Reduced student enrollment and higher paper and production costs have all contributed to declining profits since their peak in the late 1960s (Noble, 1984).

Fear of job—or even company—termination permeates the atmosphere of many publishing houses. Top management is frequently shifted or fired; many sales and consultant staffs have been reduced and replaced by per diem employees; many in-house editorial staffs have shrunk while outside editorial service organizations that produce part or all of a textbook program have increased.

Program completion schedules are exhausting. Development of a major K-8 series usually takes only three years. A single high school text, where one author may have more control over a product, usually takes 15 to 24 months. Printers must be scheduled months in advance of publication since most publishers use the same printers. And the entire program, with all its supporting pieces (numbering in the hundreds), must be completed to meet adoption state submission deadlines. This means that all materials must be prepared months before the possibility of return revenue. (Adoption states stipulate which textbooks can be sold in the state. Missing a submission deadline means elimination from consideration and therefore no sales in the state for about six years—a potential dollar loss of millions.)
Completed programs are rarely field-tested. Sample lessons are "tried out" on groups of students to see if directions are clear, lesson format is workable, or how teachers and students react to the materials while the program is being written so it can be changed before the printing film or plates are made. However, this means the buyer becomes the field test for many newly developed programs.

But buying a revised program is no guarantee of improvement. Since adoption states require recent copyrights, most publishers are forced into a three-year revision cycle. Unenforced and loosely interpreted copyright laws generally require a 10 percent change—which 10 percent is left to the discretion of the publisher. Modifications usually take a very minor form—a change in the covers, graphics, or labels could be 10 percent. The addition of a box of dittoes or other supplementary components could be 10 percent.

But most important, a publisher must produce a product that "appeals" to the buyer. This means the textbook must be "attractive." Pictures must be "appealing." The instructional part of the program must not be too lengthy, or the program will appear difficult to teach. Ideally, the pupil page and the teacher's manual page should be turned at the same time.

For content subjects in the middle and high schools, "attractive" also means "coverage." Favorite topics must be included at appropriate grades along with skills or topics requested by Texas, California, Florida, and North Carolina (the four most influential adoption states) as well as several large cities (Chicago, New York, and Detroit, to name a few). Neglecting to "mention" some of their preferences could mean instant elimination.

Supplementary materials are in demand. They must be numerous, provide easy-to-correct independent seatwork, and meet the needs of all types of students: learning or emotionally disabled, visual, hearing, or speech impaired; those who come from other cultures or speak other languages; and those who simply can't read. There must be options for the gifted and talented and letters offered in several languages to parents. Any program without these accompanying supplements, or suggestions labeled in the teacher's manual, may again be quickly eliminated.

Supplementary materials are created in some interesting ways. Sometimes workbooks from previous programs are stripped of covers, page numbers, and graphics and then reassembled and sold as support for the "new" program. Often workbooks, dittoes, tests, and other supplementary items are written by outside editorial service organizations. Ironically, these same writers may be writing similar materials for competing publishers. Developed separately, many supplementary materials do not correlate with either content or instruction, but do allow for greater flexibility of materials—and greater sales potential.

The best source of income for publishers and sales reps is from consumable materials. Consumable items mean yearly replacement, which ensures repeat business for the life of the program—from five to ten years. The amount of return revenue depends on the subject and grade. For instance, percentage estimates of the initial purchase price returned every year vary— for elementary subjects, a low of 0 percent in science to a high of 35 percent in reading. Perhaps that explains why so many publishers publish spelling and phonics materials. In high school, it is much less, 0 to 10 percent, depending on whether they need a workbook or a lab manual.

Some publishers indirectly force purchase of all supplementary materials by offering closed computer management systems (no other publishers' materials may be entered into the system). Management systems provide prescriptions of additional activities. Student needs determined by test results. Since no other materials may be indexed into the system, all prescriptions are for the one publisher. Thus all materials, many consumable, must be purchased from that publisher.

There's no secret about any of this. It's called good sales strategy and satisfies customer demand for extra material. Most publishers are open and honest about it—and will change if customers change their demands. One sales agent who heard me relate the above information at a workshop recently admitted, "It's true. Many supplementary materials are written by low-paid writers and are not very good. But if we don't have them, we lose the adoption."

Publishing houses are staffed with knowledgeable, dedicated, and honest employees. Usually former educators, they entered publishing hoping to improve the quality of education by providing good textbooks. Often frustrated, they must constantly compromise between what sells and what's best. Unfortunately, the two are not synonymous and are frequently unrelated. All major companies have produced good programs that won't sell. Today publishers do not have the resources to produce a new product that may be superior educationally but has a high risk of failure. To produce an Edsel in today's market could be catastrophic.

The Textbook
Adoption states, special interest groups, and readability formulas have all contributed to produce textbooks "designed by a committee, written by a committee, and selected by a com-
Many textbooks have no clear point of view since there is no one author. American history has been revised (FitzGerald, 1979), and Darwin and his theory of evolution have been eliminated from one science text and minimized in others (Doyle, 1984). Sentences have been shortened and vocabulary reduced to monosyllables that pass readability formulas but often obscure meaning (Armbruster, 1984). The result is too many textbooks with too many facts—and pages—unrelated to underlying concepts (Rowe, 1983)—many without in-depth challenge (Pauling, 1983), and American society presented as ideal or unrealistic.

For example, authors of reading and literature texts are asked to include stories that have no sexual overtones, no obscene words, no violence, no murder, and nothing downbeat. Authors must avoid all stories that concern death and all stereotypes in major or minor roles. Story characters should represent an even distribution of major populations (including the physically handicapped and elderly); they should uphold wholesome family values and may not eat junk food.

The possibility of finding good literature that meets all these requirements is very difficult and has resulted in the elimination of many classic works of literature. Many basal readers depict a world where girls do not play with dolls and women are airline pilots, dump truck drivers, or construction workers. If a woman is black or Hispanic, she is probably a doctor or lawyer. Boys, on the other hand, rarely play baseball—at least without girls—and white men are not to be found at the office. Literature about evil witches, mysterious hunchbacks, and any minority person depicted as poor or naughty has been eliminated from most reading textbooks. Birthday parties are devoid of ice cream or cake (California considers this junk food), while many adventures occur with Texas backdrops. (Texas, which dominates control of the market with its unique direct purchase of textbooks, prefers Texas settings.)

The goal of the above criteria should be applauded in most cases, but should your district eliminate a textbook if it violates one of these criteria? There isn’t a simple answer. On the one hand, had not large adoption cities and states demanded change and refused to buy without it, these changes may not have occurred. On the other hand, selecting textbooks by this elimination process also eliminates programs that teach the subject best. Again, each district must return to its own definition of what a textbook is. If the textbook is primarily a manual of instruction, shouldn’t selection be focused on finding out which program does that best? Then, if the selected book does portray a stereotype in one story, for example, couldn’t this story be used as an example of what a stereotype is?

Webster’s defines the textbook as a manual of instruction; as containing the “principles of a subject used as a basis for instruction.” Most textbooks are designed by publishers to provide the base of instruction in a given subject. Generally, publishers expect teachers to judiciously select topics, units, or activities and support them with other resources. Unfortunately, many programs are not marketed this way. Why?

Today the textbook has become the total program. Research shows reliance on the textbook from 70 to 95 percent (EPIE, 1976, 1977; Shannon, 1982) of classroom time, depending on the subject and study. With students spending up to 70 percent (Durkin, 1983) of instructional time directly involved with workbooks, dittos, and other seatwork activities. One study in reading discovered that both teachers and administrators believed textbooks were based on scientific truth and that application of textbook materials would produce student learning (Shannon, 1982, 1983).

There is no such thing as a “perfect” textbook or textbook program. Each district must remodel and adapt the selected publishers’ product in order to meet its unique student and faculty needs. This may mean omitting chapters, adding multiple copies of trade books, or designing specialized units. Sections of tests might be rewritten to more closely match instruction, content, district goals, or state tests. Workbooks and dittos may be substituted with student projects and papers. Ultimately, the publisher’s program should not be the district’s program.

**Conclusion**

In any free market producers respond to consumer demands. If the majority of consumers continue to select textbooks by a process of elimination, then most publishers will continue to
include everything anyone wishes—without offending someone else. If school districts continue to believe there is no problem with textbook selection and do not provide both time and training for textbook evaluation, then selection committees will continue to focus evaluation on pretty pictures, favorite topics, amusing agents, and seducing sales presentations. If districts continue to select textbooks because of free materials, then publishers will continue to compete by providing bigger and better deals.

However, if customers first take the time to analyze what they want a textbook to accomplish, determine how the textbook should accomplish it, and select the textbook that best accomplishes this goal, then districts will not only obtain the best programs available today; they will also ensure a better textbook for tomorrow.

In 1978 research, EPIE reported that less than 1 percent of teacher training institutions offered any training in textbook evaluation. Curious as to who those 1 percent are and what specific training is provided, I have informally interviewed professors when visiting different states. Although no figures were kept, many teachers throughout the country have confirmed that this has been their experience.

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