

Textbooks

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Kid-Rating: An In-depth Textbook Evaluation Technique

A "kid-rating" is an objective method of trying out your three finalist textbook candidates with students, which produces more accurate results than the usual classroom pilots of new textbooks. But far more important than determining which textbook works best for your students, the strategy provides an opportunity to teach critical thinking. Further, it requires that students explain to each other how they read, understand, and remember or process textbook information. And teachers, listening to students, learn how best to teach their classes.

What Is a Kid-Rating? Before involving the students, select a topic, skill, or concept critical to the course of study, yet one which students have not had any prior preparation for understanding. Using the indices, photocopy that section including pictures, questions, and objectives (if part of that section) from each of the three finalist textbooks and designate a publisher code (e.g., A, B, C). Make one set for every six students.

Next, explain to the students that they are to help determine which of the three finalist textbooks will be purchased, stressing the large sum of money being spent and the number of students the text will influence for the specific number of years for the life of your adoption. Tell them their task will be to determine which textbook best teaches them the concept, skill, or topic—and why. Physically rearrange students so they work in pairs, but with six in a group. Each team should reflect the spectrum of reading abilities, for the objective is not to get "right answers," but to determine the quality of instruction and presentation of each publisher.

Begin the study with some measure of what students will be expected to know: a test, a sample of what students can already do, or a model of what

they will be expected to do. Explain that this is a test they are expected to fail—they love this! Their task is not to get the answers, but to write down everything they need to know in order to pass the test including test format, definitions, problem solving skills, test-taking strategies.

Once the test is completed, have students determine which textbook best teaches them what they needed to know in order to pass the test. Encour-

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age them to write their reactions all over the duplicated textbooks. Initially you may need to guide them with questions and comments such as these:

- Circle the places where the information you need to know is stated. Star the passages that make this information clear—you can remember it or say it in your own words.

- Underline any unknown words, and see if you can find a clue for understanding them. Mark where you found a clue, and write why it did or didn't help.

- Do the pictures, graphs, margin notes and so on help you understand, or do they present new information that doesn't fit with what you need to understand? Write why it does or doesn't help.

When each pair of students is finished with the first textbook, they rotate with another pair in their group. Each pair of students within the group should now

be looking at a different textbook. Continue rotating until all pairs have evaluated all three textbook excerpts.

At this point each team of six must reach consensus as to which book best teaches them—and why. They should always refer to their list of "need to know" items for guidelines. If obtaining consensus is not easy, have them prepare a list of pros and cons for each textbook. If consensus still cannot be reached, those students who have most difficulty reading and understanding textbooks become the authorities. Those who could easily grasp the concept must listen to those who didn't. In other words, students use the textbook selection task to describe to each other—and to their teacher—how they think.

Finally, a spokesperson from each group explains the decision of the group, including their specific proof as to why they did not like the other texts. Then open it up to whole-class discussion and debate. Your role at this point is to challenge each student's decision, pushing him or her to try to demonstrate why a specific passage helped him or her to understand.

Compile the results for this lesson; then repeat the same process with another topic, skill or concept. The second time, they're adamant about how textbooks should be written! If consensus is still not reached, try a third lesson. Involve as many classes as you choose. You'll hear students arguing in the corridors and at lunch over which textbook was best. And teachers of other subjects, be prepared: students will beg to evaluate your textbooks too.

What Will You Learn? The teacher's role in this activity is to walk around the room with hands clasped over mouth, listening to students tell each other comments like these:

- "I never read the textbook 'cause Mr. X only tests on his lectures. He tells ya what's gonna be tested 'cause he only tests on stuff he yells about."

<p>● "I always read the questions at the end first. You can usually answer them from the subtitles. See, this program does it here."</p> <p>● "This is a real turnoff: too much writing. I never read this stuff, I ask Ms. X. She always gives me the answer when I act dumb enough."</p> <p>● "Don't you know that? When three numbers are big like that, you gotta add. You don't gotta read that!"</p> <p>The information you learn from students is impressive. In many instances teachers thought students would have difficulty with a particular textbook, and the students did not—teachers learned their expectations were too low. You also learn how students cheat, how they read, how they study, how they think. You learn how you should teach the individuals in your class because they tell you.</p> <p>The information you learn about textbooks is fascinating. In Melissa's chemistry class the students found an error and were livid:</p> <p>● "Throw this one out! It's wrong!"</p>	<p>● "How are we supposed to learn something when the textbooks aren't even right?"</p> <p>● "I must be smarter than I think—I figured out their mistakes."</p> <p>In another class students found one book had information different from the other two and falsely assumed it was inaccurate. The teacher wisely said, "How do you know that one is wrong?" This challenge led to a frantic search for the truth in libraries and through personal interviews.</p> <p>In elementary science classes students have found activities that don't have anything to do with the content. In other classes students found that the objectives in the beginning and the questions at the end matched but the content did not contain the information. Many found irrelevant and distracting content in boxed or highlighted information.</p> <p><i>Well Worth the Effort.</i> Finally, the information students learn from each other about the many different ways to approach reading, studying, and think-</p>	<p>ing improves the study and thinking skills of all students, with the brighter students often fascinated by the creative thought processes of the less academically talented students.</p> <p>The information students learn about textbooks and written materials in general is well worth the effort: "You know," said one 8th grade social studies student to his partner, "we shouldn't read just one textbook. We should be reading three to really understand this stuff."</p> <p>"Yeah," said his partner. "You know, I bet we should read three newspapers, too, if we really want to get the truth." □</p> <p>Connie Muther is Director of Textbook Adoption Advisory Service, 25 B Esquire Dr., Manchester, CT 06040. Melissa Conrad is a Chemistry Teacher, Torrington High School, Major Besse Dr., Torrington, CT 06790.</p> <p>© Copyright Connie Muther, 1988 All rights reserved.</p>
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