

JOHN OLSON

Corporate Influence  
in Schools

# Do Not Use as Directed: Corporate Materials in the Schools

The antidote to corporate propaganda in the classroom is a critical view.

The offer of corporate materials is one many schools cannot refuse. To begin with, corporations produce materials about up-to-the-second topics, using the latest advances in educational technologies—and everyone knows schools never have all the resources they require, especially current ones. In addition, not only are the materials free or available at low cost, but sophisticated training is often provided. Indeed, they are often linked—no training, no material.

Further, teacher groups and various state agencies may endorse corporate materials because they have participated in their development or share goals in common. Indeed, state agencies themselves are major sources of free materials, which naturally reflect the policies of government that the agency hopes to foster through the school system. These endorsing groups give the materials an aura of legitimacy, making it easier to use them, perhaps less critically than were they not endorsed.

Moreover, corporate materials themselves often have the look of bona-fide educational ones. The packaging, the teacher guides, the handouts—all give the impression that the materials are part of the usual resources teachers use. Often corporate materials have this look because the contractors who work for corporations hire teachers to produce them.

It is not surprising that school boards cooperate with corporations in making materials available to schools. How can schools not use such materials?

## A Critical Analysis

Taking a critical look at any corporate materials—whether from government agencies or commercial corporations—is really a subset of critical analysis of text materials, and textbooks themselves are not exempt. It is quite possible to find slanted treatment in texts, treatment that is politically acceptable, but wrongheaded.

However, textbooks are written with intentions different from those of corporate propaganda. Educational virtues are supposed to, and generally do, control their production. But the corporation has a vested interest in the way you *think* about the subject matter of the materials. For example, the Milk Marketing Board cares how you think about milk—it has a partisan view about the benefits of milk. So does the Egg Marketing Board about eggs, as does McDonald's about how you view hamburgers. They want the public to think well of what they do. Conversely,

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educational textbooks are intended to get students to think critically and carefully about what they read.

Corporations are free, of course, to promote their views—we live in a plural society, and the marketplace of ideas is open for business. However, educators must be ever vigilant about the status of corporate materials: Why are they produced at all? What is their point of view? How should we think about the subject under study if we follow directions for their use? Why should we follow their directions at all? Intended as they are to rally people to a cause, materials produced with a public relations aim are prone to misrepresentation.

Clearly, schools need access to materials, but corporations cannot supply the materials we need. We can, however, use them as opportunities to learn about how propaganda works, to recover the deep messages of the materials. We can use them—but only cautiously. Teachers need access to other materials—books on nutrition, for example, from an alternative point of view. These other materials, alas, are not as well produced. They lack the input from official teacher groups, although they are often produced by teachers with alternative ideas. They receive neither corporate, nor government, nor official teacher support—only corporate materials receive such support, and many of these alternative materials are flawed. They, too, tend to hide key issues and distort the other side of things, but they do present an alternative view.

The only way any materials written with a propaganda intention—corpo-

rate, activist, or errant mainstream text—become educational is in the hands of teachers whose intention it is to engender critical awareness and independence of thought. This is the essential antidote to propaganda.

### The Teacher's Role

How can teachers engender critical awareness and independence of thought in their students? In the case of science, which is my particular area of concern, it is important for teachers to reflect on the way the subject itself is taught. Our very idea of what science is like as a discipline may be faulty as a result of how the subject is presented. Are we wedded to a static and antiquated idea of what the doing of science is like? Are we afraid of our ignorance of controversial issues? The first step in engendering the critical spirit is to take a critical view of issues and of how one's subject itself is taught.

Second, as texts often do not capture the spirit of critical inquiry, teachers must look elsewhere; seeking out

groups with alternative points of view, for example, on energy, on nutrition, on health, and finding out the basis for their alternative view. We must analyze and evaluate what the text says about the way knowledge claims are dealt with, about competing theories in the subject, about how the subject is applied in everyday life, and about related social issues. An analysis of the deficiencies of texts gives teachers a platform for deciding what supplementary materials are needed and how they can be treated.

Third, teachers can supplement texts by designing their own materials. They could also form consortia for sharing their materials and for providing support to each other as they tackle the difficult task of introducing social issues in the classroom based on a critical approach to resources. This is not a new idea, but basing the development of such materials on a critical evaluation of texts and stressing social issues may be new for some, and so might be embracing a collaborative approach to such development.

### Their Choice, Our Responsibility

In the end, it is the teacher who renders materials truly educational by making them serve educational purposes—the cultivation of critical awareness and independence of mind. Students need to be able to think for themselves, sort out the value basis of argument, see behind rhetoric, and assess the validity of the claims on their allegiance. These habits of mind run counter to the purposes of corporations whose very existence depends on uncritical allegiance to their products and their points of view. If corporations want to invest in materials directed at schools, that is their choice—they have a right to produce those materials. We have a responsibility to see them for what they are. □

*Author's note:* A longer version of this article appeared in the *Australian Administrator* newsletter.

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