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Improving the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Textbook Selection Procedures: A Smorgasbord of Suggestions and Strategies

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Textbook selection in the United States used to be quite simple. As Nila Banton Smith (1986) reminds us, choices in colonial America were limited to the New England Primer and a Holy Bible. Throw in a slate and a lunch pail and children were fully equipped for the school year!

However, textbook selection either for basal readers or content area textbooks is much more complex today (Farr, Tulley, and Powell, 1987). Educators charged with the responsibility of text selection are barraged with a bewildering array of textbooks. The responsibility, whether selecting textbooks for a state, school district, school, or for an individual classroom, is to make an educated choice from this bewildering array — because the consequences of the choice are monumental.

First, the outlay of expense for textbooks does not merit a margin for error. Once a decision is made, it is a decision that must be endured for five or six years due to the

economical infeasibility of reordering. Second, the texts *can* and in many cases *will* dictate the curriculum. Studies suggest that 90% of teacher decision-making is governed by textbooks (Muther, 1985c). Moreover, administrators often *expect* teachers to rely on textbooks for instructional planning (Shannon, 1987). Therefore, a simple "flip test" (i.e., a cursory examination of sample texts) is unacceptable (Powell, 1986).

In recent years, numerous professional books and articles have outlined strategies and suggestions for textbook selection. The purpose of this article is to integrate this information and to provide school or district level administrators, reading resource specialists, or individual teachers charged with the responsibility of conducting a text selection an overview of components of the textbook selection process. Readers are encouraged to select from the smorgasbord of ideas contained herein and to structure a contextually appropriate selection sequence.

The smorgasbord is organized into three sections: the salad bar, the main course, and the dessert bar. The salad bar includes topics leading to and including the initial screening. The main course incorporates methods for conducting an in-depth examination of textbooks targeted during the initial screening and then calls for a final decision. The final section, the dessert bar, encompasses plans for implementation of the textbook and an evaluation of the textbook selection process.

The salad bar

Textbook Committee. Although individual administrators or teachers may have the authority to make a text selection autonomously, more typically committees are charged with the responsibility. If the committee is limited to

administrators and teachers, then the ownership of the decision rests solely in their laps (Barnard and Hetzel, 1989). Therefore, it is recommended that the composition of the textbook selection committee represent administrators, curriculum supervisors, teachers, parents (and thus the community at large), and (to the degree that it is possible) students.

At the outset, appropriate authorities need to clarify the role and responsibilities of the committee. Will the committee make the final decision of which text to choose, make a recommendation to a governing board, or simply serve as a search and screen body? If this information is not provided automatically, the committee should seek the information out.

Selection procedure. Delineate an overall selection procedure at the first committee meeting. A proposed sequence of objectives and corresponding tasks can be presented at this first meeting, then discussed and amended. Group consensus and commitment to the procedure is critical.

Communicate the procedure (including deadline dates) to the community at large and develop a plan for keeping the community up-to-date with the procedure as it unfolds. Additionally, determine a mechanism for soliciting input from the administrators, teachers, parents, etc. who are not included on the selection committee. Devise a plan which enumerates the precise ways the communication process will be carried out (e.g., written letters, memos, public meetings).

An important component of the selection procedure is to determine the role of publisher sales representatives.

Decide if, how, and when publisher sales representatives are to be involved. Sales representatives can be helpful but, on the other hand, glitz and biased presentation can sway committee members. Barnard and Hetzel (1989) call this "the wine and cheese phenomenon."

If sales representatives are to be invited to make presentations, establish a set of guidelines. For example, if a salesperson points out flaws in the competitor's product, ask the salesperson to give specific examples of the flaw – not just to speak in generalities (Muther, 1985c). Likewise, ask for evidence to support publishers' claims about their own texts. Examine the labels – does the text really do what it claims to do? Consider timing. Should publisher representatives be present before, during, or after the time when the committee looks at materials? How many minutes will each publisher be allowed for presentation?

Needs assessment. Assessment of local needs is a prerequisite for textbook selection. Consider several areas of need, including subject matter content (what content do we want to teach?), social content (what values do we wish to impart?), readability – friendliness (are levels of difficulty and text features appropriate for the intended group of students?), instructional design (how do we wish to teach the content?), and production quality (what level of durability can we afford?) (Young and Riegeluth, 1988).

A variety of methods can be used to conduct a needs assessment (Johnson, Meiller, Miller, and Summers, 1987). A survey (open or closed-ended; telephone, face-to-face, or written) can be made of administrators, teachers, and parents to gauge their perception of needs. Focused discussions at faculty meetings or public hearings can clarify priorities and concerns.

Research update. Because the textbook selection committee is likely to be composed of members with varying levels of familiarity with current research, planning for a research update is critical. This is particularly important given the focus on classroom applications prevalent in research in recent years.

Muther (1985b) suggests limiting the research update to results only. Committees do not need to be encumbered with statistically significant differences and such. Muther provides a list of research information sources: 1) consultants from local colleges and universities; 2) consultants from local, district, or state departments of education; 3) reviews of literature from local, district, or state departments of education; 4) reviews of literature from professional organizations, and 5) *Encyclopedia of Educational Research* (Mitzel, 1982).

Defining the ideal. Information gathered from the needs assessment and research update can then be used to define and describe the ideal textbook. This "vision of the ideal" is particularly useful in guiding the committee in the selection process and, more specifically, to designate initial screening, in-depth screening, and final selection criteria (Young and Riegeluth, 1988).

Initial Screening. The final step at the salad bar is to conduct an initial screening, i.e., to target three to five texts or textbook series to scrutinize thoroughly. An initial screening checklist can be used to limit the number of texts for more intensive evaluation. Using the "vision of the ideal" as a framework, the committee can develop the checklist based on identified needs. Bailey (1988) suggests that a checklist should be relatively easy to complete and should include items relevant to each of the assessed needs.

Main course

The primary objective of this phase of the textbook selection process is to make the final decision. However, in order for this to happen an in-depth examination of each of the textbooks identified during the initial screening phase is in order.

In-depth screening. As with the needs assessment, inspect five major elements of text (Young and Riegeluth, 1988): subject matter content, social content, readability, instructional design, and production quality.

Because the in-depth examination is time consuming (but necessary), it may be prudent to appoint subcommittees to complete various examination tasks (Barnard and Hetzel, 1989). For example, one subcommittee can be charged to evaluate only the social content of all targeted series. Or, each subcommittee could be assigned one text (or one series) and be responsible for evaluating all of the five major elements.

1) *Subject matter content.* Young and Riegeluth (1988) recommend that content analysis include an examination of the depth and comprehensiveness of content coverage, currency and accuracy of information, and the credentials of author(s), consultants and reviewers. The guiding questions are, "What is being taught?" and "Is the content consistent with our designated state, district, and local curriculum requirements?"

One technique for comparing content coverage among textbooks is a story sort (Muther, 1987). With a story sort a similar story (in narrative text) or passage (covering the same content in an expository text) are photocopied and

compared. This allows for a direct examination of how different textbooks cover the same material.

2) *Social content.* Social content evaluation is guided by the question, "What values are being imparted — overtly and implicitly?" Certainly the social/content analysis of texts must reflect designated local needs and values as determined in the needs assessment. However, seek texts that offer equitable representation of races, ethnic groups, sexes, age groups, and the handicapped. Equitable representation cannot simply be ascertained by the number of pages or number of illustrations that include representation of a particular group. It is necessary to examine materials closely and systematically to detect subtle biases (Young and Riegeluth, 1988).

3) *Readability.* Students appreciate textbooks that facilitate learning. Consequently, textbook evaluation needs to identify the most "readable" textbooks by addressing three questions. The first question is *What is the approximate grade level of a textbook?* Readability levels are often reported as grade levels determined by formulas based on semantic and syntactic elements. If publishers do not provide the readability level of the textbook, committee members can estimate the grade level of the textbook by using one or more readability formulas (e.g., Dale and Chall, 1948; Fry, 1977; Raygor, 1977). Computer software is now available to avoid cumbersome hand calculations (See Figure 1).

The second question is *To what degree does the text include features that enhance comprehension?* Research indicates that text features (e.g., pre-posed questions, headings and subheadings, new vocabulary in boldface type) that make the text "friendly" or "considerate" to the

reader are critical for children with reading problems (Osborn, Jones and Stein, 1985). Several checklists for evaluating the qualitative attributes of text have been devised (Armbruster and Anderson, 1981; Bader, 1987; Irwin and Davis, 1980; Readence, Bean and Baldwin, 1985; Singer, 1986; Steinley, 1987).

Figure 1: Computer Software

Readability (Apple)
Micro Power and Light
12820 Hillcrest Road, Suite 224
Dallas TX 75230

Readability Analysis Program (Apple, IBM)
Random House
201 E. 50th St.
New York NY 10022

Reading Level Analysis (Apple)
Berta Max, Inc.
Leary Way
Seattle WA 98119

The third question is *How do students interact with the textbook?* The cloze procedure can be used to determine how well a textbook matches the reading achievement levels of students. A cloze test consists of a passage extracted verbatim from a target textbook from which words have been systematically deleted. Students' ability to construct meaning from the textbooks is gauged by how well they can supply the missing words. Readence, Bean and Baldwin (1985) provide a comprehensive description of how to construct and administer a cloze test. It is recommended that if a cloze test is used to gauge student interaction with text, the test should be administered to students of a wide range of reading abilities.

4) *Instructional design*. While content coverage refers to *what* is being taught, instructional design refers to *how* the material is being presented. An evaluation of instructional design is guided by the question, "How is content taught?" Young and Riegeluth (1988) suggest that the instructional design of texts be evaluated on three different levels: macro-level, micro-level, and message design.

The purpose of a macro-level evaluation is to get an overall picture of the instructional design of the textbook. Typically this macro-level evaluation is limited to a review of the scope and sequence chart. However, Conn (1988) proposes that an examination of various elements of individual texts should also be incorporated at this level. Textbook evaluators should survey headings and subheadings to determine the flow of presentation, and individual units to see if they are focused and manageable from an instructional standpoint.

The purpose of a micro-level perusal is to determine how a particular skill is presented. A skill trace (Muther, 1984; 1985; Cotton, Casem, Kroll, Langas, Rhodes, and Sisson, 1988) is one method for analyzing the instructional design of textbooks at the micro-level. With a skill trace the evaluator isolates a particular skill and traces it through the series of the books across all grade levels. Using this technique it is possible to evaluate systematically how a skill is introduced, developed, and reinforced.

At the micro-level it is also important to assess if adaptations for learners with special needs (e.g., mainstreamed special education students, second language learners, readers who are not yet skilled, gifted or advanced students) are incorporated in skill and concept instruction. The absence of such suggestions for adaptation will put an

unnecessary burden on curriculum supervisors or individual teachers if instructional modifications are to be developed and implemented to meet individual needs.

As skill presentation is scrutinized, it is imperative to keep in mind the implications of Durkin's classic study (1981). Does the text teach and not just test skills? In other words, are specific instructional strategies provided? Jones (1980) suggests that effective strategy instruction involves specific definition of the strategy, step-by-step instruction in using the strategy, built in opportunities for practice with specific feedback, and informing students when to use the strategy.

Message design evaluation deals with an appraisal of page layout. Does the page format facilitate learning? Are graphics in close proximity to corresponding text? Examine the message design of all major components of the text including the text itself, teacher's edition, and core supplementary materials.

Message design also encompasses supplementary materials (e.g., worksheets, workbooks, and tests). Typically publishers offer more supplementary materials than will be used. Decide which supplementary materials should be omitted from the decision making processes; examine carefully those elements that have direct impact on the quality of daily instruction. Worksheets, workbooks and other supplementary activities should be evaluated for task content, task design, opportunities for sufficient and appropriate review, clarity and consistency of instructional language, and opportunities for open ended responses (Center for the Study of Reading, 1990). Tests should include clear guidelines for administration, scoring and interpretation; unambiguous directions and item content for

students; and a distinct match between what is being taught and what is being tested (Center for the Study of Reading, 1990).

Finally, when considering message design also scrutinize teacher's manuals. Is information in teacher's manuals presented in a "considerate," usable manner? Does the teacher's manual include creative supplementary activities?

5) *Production quality.* While production quality is certainly a factor that needs to be considered, several cautions should be noted. Most texts are bound by the same companies and thus are of the same durability. Replacement and rebinding contracts are available, so if texts fall apart during the adoption cycle, they are replaced for free. You can't test durability.

Making the final decision

One of the best ways to obtain information about the worth of a textbook is to communicate with professionals currently using the text. An on-site visit to other school districts that are using the textbook can be an excellent source of information (Muther, 1985a). If on-site visits are not practical, structured telephone interviews can serve as an alternative. In either case, include at least three districts to visit or interview (Muther, 1985a).

Publishers do not have time to field test materials extensively (Muther, 1985a), nor do most text selection committees. However, it may be useful to have a limited "kid rating" to determine how children respond to the text material. Pilot testing of the text can help identify strengths and weaknesses of the text as well as student preferences.

Before the final decision is made, summarize and evaluate all data collected. Finally, reflect back on the initial designation of an ideal text, and then, *make a selection*.

Dessert bar

The selection of a text or text series is not the end. The committee should consider several additional tasks: implementation of the text, provision of suggestions for evaluation of the text while it is in use, and evaluation procedures and recommendations for successive textbook selection committees.

Implementation plan. A model for implementation of the text is mandatory for a successful inauguration. Develop an overall model for implementation that includes orientation for administrators and curriculum supervisors, in-service training for teachers, and orientation for parents. Structure a plan for distribution of new texts including early distribution of teacher's editions. Make arrangements for using ongoing support services available from publishers.

Monitoring plan. It cannot be assumed that simply because teachers and students have books in hand that all is well. Consider a model for monitoring textbook implementation. In the model incorporate short-term evaluation of textbook implementation so that adaptations and modifications to meet local needs can be made as soon as possible. Include long-term evaluation of administrator, teacher, parent, and student satisfaction with the text as well as student progress.

Process evaluation. Devote the final committee session to an evaluation of the text selection process. Document and evaluate each step of the process precisely

so that subsequent textbook selection committees have the benefit of the experience.

Conclusion

This smorgasbord is laden with a variety of selections for the salad, main course, and dessert. Some may say that it is much too heavily laden – a fast food menu would be preferable – “just give me a textbook checklist and finish the job!”

However, a fast food menu may lead to indigestion. When and if we are tapped with the responsibility of choosing a text, we need to savor each step and treat it as an opportunity to serve students, and as an opportunity for personal nourishment.

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