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Point-Counterpoint: Value of School Textbooks

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Educators frequently are involved in textbook adoptions in various content areas, an important activity because textbook programs may define school curricula by dictating what is taught, in what sequence, and for how long. Recently, education groups have criticized school textbooks for being boring, incoherent, and “dumbed-down.” Viewed from one perspective the selection of new textbooks offers little hope for improving the school reading program because by their nature textbooks can inhibit the teaching of thinking. Viewed from a different perspective, textbooks offer the potential for much improvement in the reading program, if features of the text are used to the fullest with a critical approach. Educators looking to improve the reading programs in their schools may reasonably ask, *What are the positive and negative values of using textbooks?* This point-counterpoint discussion focuses on four issues involved in answering that question.

Encyclopedic or comprehensive?

Point: Textbooks are encyclopedic. Because textbooks must be the source of all possible topics to be taught in a class, they include a little information on many topics, discuss none in depth, and fail to represent multiple viewpoints. As a result, according to Boyer (1983), “most

textbooks provide students with a highly simplified view of reality and practically no insight into the methods by which the information has been gathered and the facts distilled" (p. 143). Looking at math textbooks from a Foucauldian viewpoint, McBride (1989) describes the encyclopedic nature as a language framework of rigid categories that encourages students to "think in dualistic ways that dichotomize context from text" (p. 42). Perry (1981) explains dualistic thinking as dividing meaning into two realms — right vs. wrong or good vs. bad. Thinking about a textbook in a dualistic way means treating it as an authority that holds the right answer for every problem.

Teaching for thinking requires a critical approach, one that promotes questioning of authority. Perry explains that knowledge should be conceived as multiple and relative instead of dualistic, emphasizing the importance of the context in which the knowledge is presented. In McBride's investigation of math textbooks, mathematics was found to be presented in contexts which are less meaningful to women than men:

If an historical picture is shown of a mathematician, it is that of a man; if a cartoon is shown, too many times, it is a girl struggling with a concept. The resulting image, even for those of us teaching math, is that serious mathematicians are (and historically have been) men (p. 42).

McBride also noted that her women students were often not familiar with mathematical concepts presented in the context of baseball problems, further alienating them from mathematical knowledge. These examples suggest that textbooks, as single encyclopedic sources of knowledge, are unlikely to provide the multiple contexts needed by students of various backgrounds to promote learning. To perform higher order cognitive skills like analysis and

synthesis in a subject area students need in-depth knowledge gained from reading many different viewpoints on the subject.

Counterpoint: Textbooks are comprehensive. They provide an overview of topics related to the course of study, showing relative importance of interrelated topics and placing those topics in perspective. Every topic does not require extensive study, and any topic can be used as a departure point for further study, often facilitated by reference lists provided by the authors. The scope of the curriculum would be inordinately restricted without the breadth of content provided by textbooks. Developing thinking skills would pose too great a challenge with a curriculum that is narrow in scope due to limited information. Higher order thinking skills can and should be applied to topics as they are treated within a textbook.

Global coherence, the logical arrangement of ideas that allows the reader to see relationships between and across ideas, is the quality which makes textbook comprehensiveness an advantage to readers. A coherent textbook has a text structure of recognizable organizational patterns. Brozo and Simpson (1991) have described research showing how students' knowledge of text structure facilitates comprehension. Active learners use organizational patterns and other text features such as pronoun referents, connectives, and conjunctions to construct the flow of meaning. Other aspects of text structure include signalling devices such as previews, typographical clues, graphic organizers, and summary statements. Text structure should play a role in textbook selection, as it goes beyond superficial readability formulas that count sentences and word length. Furthermore, it is the teacher's responsibility to help students recognize and use text structure in textbooks.

When textbooks are not very coherent, it is the teacher's responsibility to create structures to help students organize text information.

The comprehensive nature of textbooks also can be used to develop students' metacognitive strategies. Brozo and Simpson (1991) cited research related to the metacognitive strategy of elaboration, including such strategies as focusing on key ideas, making connections between ideas, and integrating the ideas into personal schemata. The research showed that most secondary students lacked efficient elaboration strategies, but that they could learn them with direct instruction, modeling, demonstration and practice. Some examples of elaborations that can be developed with good or poor texts include composing titles, headings and subheadings; developing questions; paraphrasing main ideas; relating text to experiences; creating examples; making predictions; drawing inferences or conclusions; drawing pictures; creating graphic organizers; creating new problems; and applying principles to new situations. The textbook is viewed as a tool that provides a comprehensive array of information that challenges teacher and students to approach learning strategically.

Third-hand sources or efficient compilations

Point: Textbooks are not primary or even secondary sources. They are written by authors who read the current reports of knowledge in an area (primary sources) and also the commentaries on those current reports (secondary sources) and then write a third-hand, supposedly easy-to-read version of the current state of knowledge in a field. This approach is inimical to teaching thinking because it asks students and teachers to accept the notion that knowledge should be broken down into digested chunks before it can be swallowed. Because it takes considerable time for

the experts to read, digest and rewrite the current state of knowledge in an area, textbooks are always at least three to five years out of date. In contrast, teaching for thinking helps students develop an appetite for the most current primary sources of knowledge in an area and the ability to digest the knowledge for themselves.

Another significant effect of textbooks' distance from primary sources is their susceptibility to censorship. For use in their literature anthologies, textbook editors regularly create sanitized segments of novels by popular authors, such as Judy Blume and M.E. Kerr, by excising episodes focusing on controversial topics like sexual maturation and adolescent experimentation with drugs. The problem is that the stories lose their essence because important character motivation elements have been deleted. Social studies textbooks have been subject to waves of censorship efforts from both the left and right wing political perspectives, resulting in books which ignore or put a false front on many vital social issues. As Fitzgerald (1979) concludes in the study of how and why history textbooks have changed over the decades:

The censorship of schoolbooks is simply the negative face of the demand that books portray the world as a utopia of the eternal present — a place without conflicts, without malice or stupidity where Dick (black or white) comes home with a smiling Jane to a nice house in the suburbs (p. 218).

This myth-making censorship not only hides knowledge about social concerns in our nation, it also inhibits future participating citizens from thinking critically about those issues. Fitzgerald speculates that the more young people believe the image of America described in history textbooks,

the more they may feel their own experience of conflict or suffering is unique and perhaps un-American.

Instead of textbooks, students could read primary and secondary sources. In literature and social science primary sources are abundant, whether fiction or non-fiction. These are the first hand accounts of experience seen through the eyes of the author whose name is on the cover. These sources exist for readers of all levels of abilities because different authors write for different audiences. While some primary sources such as journal articles could be used in the upper grades in teaching science and math (e.g., Mallow, 1991), secondary sources like trade books and magazine articles would be needed for most science and math teaching without textbooks. These sources are also abundantly and readily available in bookstores and libraries.

Counterpoint: Textbooks are efficient compilations of source materials. They represent analysis and synthesis of a wealth of information otherwise unavailable or too technical for classroom use. It would be unreasonable to expect teachers and students to sift through the raw data from which textbook information is derived. Textbooks present these data in forms that are more appropriate to the realities of the classrooms. Development of thinking skills would be frustrated if students and teachers always had to go directly to technical reports, professional papers, or archival documents for first-hand information. McKeachie (1986) suggested that without the structure of a good textbook students experience confusion and frustration if required to gather, judge, evaluate, analyze and synthesize information on their own from a wide variety of sources. Textbooks are efficient because they bring together many primary sources in one easily accessible reference.

An important consideration when evaluating how source materials are compiled is text technology, or the way information is put together and with what objective. Manzo and Manzo (1990) described two models of text technology, mathemagenic and generative. The mathemagenic model is described as focused on content, and is common in programmed texts and mastery learning materials. Such texts reportedly use a reductive approach to gear students toward identical responses and attempt to control student thinking. This approach inhibits development of metacognitive strategies and independent thinking. In contrast, the generative model is described as focused on the reader, and is evident in textbooks that have imbedded aids promoting learner generated metacognitive strategies. Such texts reportedly take a constructive approach that emphasize learner involvement and control. Learners use textual information to become acquainted with ideas of others and subsequently construct their own ideas. They begin to view textbooks as reference books and use them as the starting point for further study. The crux of the matter is not whether textbooks are original sources, but whether they present ideas in ways that constructively engage learners.

Expensive or cost effective?

Point: Textbooks are expensive. O'Donnell (1985) explains that a team creating a textbook works for three to four years on the project, with final development costs for a typical English text in 1991 exceeding \$100,000. Add to these costs the considerable expenses of publishing and printing textbooks to make them durable for repeated use. With the limited budgets of many schools the cost of textbooks exacts a high toll on the educational program. According to Keith (1981) the decision to undertake the development and publication of a new textbook is first based on economic rather than educational considerations. While

this is not surprising because the publishing industry exists to make a profit, neither is it reassuring. The same market forces which profit car makers to produce and sell restyled versions of the same basic models for decades without making significant improvements also guide the textbook industry. Some economic aspects of textbook selection were chronicled by Palonsky (1986), a teacher educator who took a leave of absence from his university teaching position to teach social studies in a public high school:

'If we took everything worthwhile in that C-level American history textbook,' I said, 'and multiplied it by 100, we could still fit it inside a thimble'... Later (the principal) told me I had offended some of the teachers who had been a part of the book selection process, and he explained it had been the best book for the money. Funds for new texts were always limited, he told me, and this text was selected because it was least expensive (p. 61).

Ironically, the inflated cost of textbooks actually lowers their value as resources for thinking. To justify the investment needed to purchase high priced textbooks, students must use the books year after year. To protect the school's investment in the books, students are prohibited from writing reactions in them, from highlighting memorable passages, and from taking the books outside of school to read, study or share — practices recommended by most experts in study skills improvement. The lesson taught by such textbook use is that important knowledge is heavy, permanently bound, property of the school, and intended to remain in an unused condition for as long as possible. How different this is from lessons taught by our favorite tradebooks, journals and newspapers.

Counterpoint: Textbooks are cost effective. If the financial cost of textbooks is compared to the cost of

obtaining original sources, then it is clearly less expensive to purchase textbooks. Data on textbook sales showed that on the average, schools presently expend under \$35 per pupil per year for textbooks and related materials (Chall and Squire, 1991). This is a relatively low figure considering that textbooks usually are issued to each student in English, social studies, math, science and other courses. Few, if any, school systems would be able to afford adequate materials if they had to purchase or duplicate class sets of original sources. Furthermore, school systems would not be able to afford textbooks if they were consumable. While students don't gain pride of ownership, they learn to think about textbooks as useful and durable sources of information that reflect the continuity of the curriculum. Textbooks are the most cost effective way of making a wide variety of information available to students in easily accessible form.

Another cost effective aspect of textbooks is the savings of teacher time and energy. Teachers spend time and devote energy to identifying resources that supplement published texts. In addition, teachers also adapt instructional materials and develop their own supplementary materials. This is expected, and the school day is designed to accommodate it before, during and after school hours. If teachers were required to design materials on a scale as comprehensive as a textbook, they would not have the time or energy to teach. Ornstein (1990) suggested as a rule of thumb that spending more than 1 to 1 1/2 hours on developing materials for a lesson is not worth the time and effort. He cited research estimating that time spent developing completely new materials for a new program runs as high as 50 to 100 hours per hour of instruction. The availability of textbooks represents an enormous savings of teacher time and energy.

Authors: known and unknown

Point: Many textbooks are written by unknown authorities. Winterowd (1989) described such books as “authorless textbooks, put together by in-house staffs after editors and publishers have scoured the profession for ideas.” Citing two recent examples (McDougal, Littel’s *English* for grades 9-12; and Scholastic’s *Scope English: Writing and Language Skills* for grades 6-12), Winterowd forecasted an increase in this practice by which “authors disappear and texts are viewed less as books than as products.” The work of a scriptor, one who integrates the writings of several unnamed authors into a textbook has been likened by Barthes (1977) to the work of a shaman, relating the ritual narratives of a culture. Barthes’ metaphor suggests again how using textbooks negates efforts to teach students to think critically: initiates to a culture are supposed to receive its narratives, not question them.

In contrast to trade books displaying the author’s name boldly on the cover so readers can judge the author’s expertise and biases by reputation or prior experience, textbooks are assumed to be written by experts without bias. The weighing of the logic of ideas against the known level of bias and expertise of the author is lost when authors are beyond reproach or not even identified. Crismore (1985), who studied textbooks from a rhetorical perspective, explained that textbooks are not so much read in an interpretive sense, but read in the sense of disentangling the meaning:

[Readers] can follow the text structure at every point and level, but find that there is nothing beneath, that these texts can be ranged over, but not pierced. To give a text an author is to impose a limit for it closes the writing. A text with an author has a purpose, an intention the author wishes the reader to see and understand — it has fixed author meanings (p. 15).

Critical reading and thinking require closed texts, ones which don't have all the answers. With such texts students can learn to find answers for themselves, become authors of their own knowledge, and join in conversation with other authors as equals instead of subordinates. Knowing the author of a book empowers students; not knowing the author of a text they must learn subjugates them.

Counterpoint: Textbooks are written by knowledgeable and experienced content specialists in collaboration with pedagogical specialists. Whether the authors are known or unknown, textbooks should be read as critically as any other reading materials. As with other materials, readers should expect textbooks to reflect the authors' biases, to represent cultural biases, and to be influenced by social contexts and political ideologies. The content specialists and pedagogical specialists who write textbooks are no more or no less biased than other authors. The teacher plays a major role in helping students ferret out biases that known and unknown authors bring to their work.

Through a discourse of text analysis (Giroux, 1988) teachers and students should question representations and interests that influence textbooks. Text analysis eliminates the notion that textbooks are neutral conveyors of ideas, by scrutinizing the cultural contexts and ideological positions they represent. Taking a critical perspective transforms textbook users from a mode of acquiring, retaining and regurgitating information to one of analyzing, integrating and making meaning of information. Criticism of ideas in textbooks provides a model that students can apply to other material as they develop lifelong habits of reading. They become critical readers and thinkers because they develop habits of mind through daily classroom processes. They learn to question information and the sources of that

information. They learn not to accept printed matter at face value, just because it was presented in a school book. A discourse of text analysis uses the textbook as a resource for development of cognitive processes and of critical consciousness about schooling.

Conclusion

Textbook adoption decisions should be based on the goals of the educational program. If the goals of the program include developing critical thinking, hunger for learning, personal interaction with books, and in-depth exploration of subjects, one argument is that choosing better textbooks may yield little gain. The essence of the counterpoint argument was captured by Ornstein (1990) who stated "The textbook is an acceptable tool for instruction as long as it is selected with care and is kept in perspective so that it is not viewed as the only source of knowledge and does not turn into the curriculum" (p. 333). Perhaps the first move that should be made is to involve teachers in deciding how valuable textbooks are now and could be in the future. Because the debate on the value of textbooks will be with us for a long time, enlightened educators will weigh both sides of the argument as they contemplate textbook adoption.

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