



Faculty Forum

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Textbooks, Teachers, "Tails," and Tyranny

A Rebuttal to Bruce Henderson

In the November 1 issue of Faculty Forum, Bruce Henderson published a scathing denouncement of textbooks. In that epistle he attacks textbooks because they have "too much influence on instruction." He goes on to list a myriad of ills attributed to the development and use of college texts. I take issue with that position. There are good texts, mediocre texts, and some as poor as the portrait Bruce paints. However, the poor must be few in number because textbooks must continually "pass muster" in order to survive. Unless a large number of faculty choose to adopt a book, it will fail and disappear from the market. In fact, this is precisely the fate of the vast majority of books and is one reason that so few undertake the task of writing a text. Nevertheless, textbooks can no more tyrannize teachers than tails can wag dogs.

It seems to me that Bruce's complaints are indictments of teachers rather than of textbooks. Any teacher who abrogates teaching responsibility to a text is a poor teacher indeed. It is the teacher's job to ensure that students leave a course with understanding and knowledge rather than with a collection of facts which will be soon forgotten. Bruce complains that textbook authors, "tend to do the analysis and synthesis of ideas for students." The amount of analysis contained in a given text is a function of the target market; however, I am puzzled by the term synthesis. No text can synthesize ideas for a student; not even the instructor can do that. I am also puzzled by Bruce's comment about conceptually oriented texts. I certainly don't know any other way to organize and present material than from a conceptual basis. Nevertheless, conceptualization is the primary reason that education requires instructors.

I cannot accept carte blanche condemnation of the textbook industry. Clearly, there are problems in the industry. Chief among these are the lag time for publication (2 years), the difficulty in finding good reviewers, and the lack of expertise possessed by editors. Further, writing a text wins a single line in the vita and counts no more than a journal article with respect to TPR despite the fact that a text can consume many times the effort. Writing does not generally pay well because few texts really sell significant numbers of books. With all these problems

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one might wonder why anyone ever actually writes a text. Clearly, people would not write unless they felt strongly about the subject matter and were convinced that they could make a contribution to the field.

Authors of textbooks make every effort to produce useful, clear and complete texts which will be valuable in an educational environment. Publishers also wish to avoid poor books, but their editors do not have the expertise to judge ultimate value. Consequently, they depend on reviewers who teach in the specific field to provide evaluation and insight. Furthermore, editors do not dictate content. Any author is free to make any approach desired. Few editors, however, will proceed to publication on a text which the reviewers have not endorsed. Although the author may wish to include controversial material, it is likely to be criticized by the reviewers and therefore excised by the editor. At any rate, no text is "pitched to the middle of the road." In this day of specialization there is no such thing as a "middle of the road." Each text is designed for a specific market by author(s) and editor in consultation, and reviewers are chosen to represent that market.

Admittedly, the target market of a particular text is not always apparent. Publishers and authors frequently do not disclose that information for fear of discouraging a prospective adopter. It is critical, therefore, for instructors to perform a thorough review of prospective texts: a quick reading of the table of contents will not suffice. This does present a problem at Western because our text rental policy discourages publishers' reps, who work on commission, from visiting the campus. Those who still call on us decry our policy and wonder why we have not adopted a procedure of purchasing a minimum percentage of all adoptions from the publishers as have the other rental schools. I wonder why also. This is an area of major concern. I would invite faculty to unite in asking Business Affairs for a policy of 50% purchase of new books on all adoptions. In the meantime, all of us will have to pay particular attention to the catalogs and brochures provided by publishers and rely less on sales reps.

Bruce ends his attack by recommending that instructors do a better job of text selection and review of manuscripts. He even suggests that we consider writing ourselves. I heartily echo these recommendations. Even if nothing financial comes of the effort, it will certainly develop an understanding of the problems and challenges and will eliminate "text thumping" attitudes while it develops better and more critical reviewers. It can also make us better scholars because it will force us to approach a course or discipline in a more meticulous manner. It has often been said that the best way to learn a subject is to teach it. I suggest that writing a text is even better.

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