



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence*

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Vol. 7, No. 6

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA

March 1, 1995

## **To Teach Our Students to Read Better, Let's Start By Eliminating the Book Rental System**

The recent SACs faculty survey of tenured and tenure-track faculty revealed that 63% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, "Having an undergraduate textbook rental plan is a good idea." What could be so wrong with a system that provides something as important as books?

I must admit that I have never been a fan of the typical college textbook. In fact, in one of the first issues of *Faculty Forum*, I argued that textbooks have too much influence on instruction. I suggested that textbooks were problematic because of their blandness and superficiality, but also because they constrained instruction. I felt (and still feel) that textbooks encourage instructors to "cover" the material and rely too much on lower-order thinking skills. At the time that article was written, some readers agreed with me and others vehemently disagreed. Little has changed in the nature of the average textbook in the years that have followed. Yes, computer software has made some inroads and there are now mechanisms for creating your own textbook, but these advances have yet to make much of an impact in many disciplines, including my own.

Regardless of the validity of my previous argument, the textbook remains central to a WCU education. But I don't think dissatisfaction with textbooks has anything to do with the SACs survey results. I believe our faculty's concern with the rental system has to do with its influence on our students' learning, with how our students read textbooks. Our average student's approach to textbook reading has several characteristics:

1. **Democratic reading.** Students assume that all words and sentences have equal value. There is no need to make thoughtful discriminations about those concepts or examples that are particularly important. This characteristic is most apparent in those books in which the ubiquitous highlighter has been employed. Whole paragraphs and even pages are covered by one or more color.
2. **Modified speed reading.** In order to finish the required reading as quickly as possible, certain features of the text must be ignored. At the beginning of the book, these features include the preface and the table of contents that provide overviews. In individual chapters, features ignored include any section headings, pictures, tables, graphs, or section or chapter summaries.
3. **Massed, not distributed, reading sessions.** Rather than distributing the amount of reading to be done over several time periods, most students try to read many pages at one sitting. Fatigue increases while reflection decreases. Memory processes are especially inefficient when a great deal of information is presented in a short time.
4. **Altered state of consciousness.** Students frequently admit to the experience we have all had of mechanically reading pages at a time without any conscious awareness of the meaning of what is read. So little consciousness is actually directed at the

content of the text that, as when driving down an interstate, there is room for planning, reverie, or song.

5. **Negative attitudes about reading and books.** Books are considered as a necessary evil, as means toward good grades, as paper to be recycled, rather than as ends, as an opportunity to increase knowledge, or as a record of intellectual effort to be treasured in a professional library.

In short, many of our students are passive readers.

What does all this have to do with the rental system? The textbook rental system is a major impediment to making our students more active readers. We need to teach them to summarize paragraphs, to generate questions about what they read, to develop examples of concepts, to draw connections between sections of text and between text, pictures, graphs and tables. Where should students do all of this? Obviously, the best place to do all these things is in the book itself. Then the student's active processing is available right with the text. The textbook becomes a permanent record of the reader's intellectual work, of the reader's personalization of what has been read.

But there is a problem. The textbooks our students are reading do not belong to them. They are rented. The first student to rent the book can fill the margins with summaries, questions, and examples, or can circle and connect related key words or phrases, but after that students are stuck with someone else's active processing, not their own.

It is time to do away with our textbook rental system. It is time to stop complaining about the poor reading skills of our students and do something. The rental system has been defended before as a marketing tool, as a means to keep student costs among the lowest of four-year institutions in North Carolina. In balance, the pedagogical costs are too high. Of course, eliminating the textbook rental system is just the first step. We also need to explore a variety of ways for making our students strategic readers, including approaches such as comprehension monitoring, elaborative encoding, tree-diagramming, and the venerable SQ3R method. But let's make the first step by encouraging our new chancellor to once again give students ownership over one of the fundamental tools of our business.

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**Comments or Questions?** If you would like to make comments about this essay or ask questions of Bruce please send your questions or comments by the 8th of the month to Terry Nienhuis (FCTE; phone: 7196; WP Mail/Vax: Nienhuis). Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.