



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
VOL. 1, NO. 3

CULLOWHEE, NORTH CAROLINA
NOVEMBER, 1988

The Tyranny of the Textbook

Why don't our students find our disciplines to be as interesting as we think they are? Why do our students spend so little time reading course-related materials? Why do so many of our students believe that learning is a matter of memorization rather than a matter of understanding? There are many factors to be considered in answering these questions, but one clear culprit is the textbook.

What is wrong with textbooks? Textbooks have too much influence on instruction, especially in lower division and general education courses. The typical textbook is comprehensive but superficial. It focuses on coverage of information rather than on conceptualization of the content. To maintain its market share, it is pitched to the middle of the road and avoids authentic controversy. It generally is written to impress the instructor with its completeness and recency, not to provide effective pedagogy to help the student. Textbook authors tend to do the analysis and synthesis of ideas for students. Thus textbooks rob those students of the opportunity to think through problems and fail to stimulate the curiosity of the reader. Textbooks give students the idea that there is a canon of revealed truth in a discipline.

In addition to being bad in themselves, textbooks have other negative influences on instruction. First, they constrain the nature of the content of the courses. It is too easy for an instructor to design the syllabus around the textbook chapters. If the textbook is conceptually oriented, that is not likely to be harmful. But a conceptually oriented textbook is a rarity indeed. Second, instructors frequently feel compelled to "cover" the whole book. As a result, time is not taken for useful diversions, student questions, oral communication, or in-depth analysis by instructors or students. Finally, because textbooks tend to be information-laden rather than conceptually oriented, the focus of instruction is on the acquisition of isolated knowledge rather than higher-order processing. Why do we bombard students with hundreds, maybe thousands of pieces of information from textbooks

STEERING COMMITTEE: FACULTY CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Scott Higgins, Chair (7113)	Judith Clauss (7295)	Frank Prochaska (7260)
Maynard Adams (7272)	Michael Dougherty (7207)	John Wade (7401)
Jim Addison (7264)	Wilburn Hayden (7112)	Jim Wallace (7244)
J.C. Alexander (7436)	Mary Anne Nixon (7401)	

CENTER STAFF

Ben Ward, Director (7196)
Jane Hall, Fellow
Terry Nienhuis, Fellow
Charles Stevens, Fellow

when we know that a year later 90% of the information will have been forgotten outright and much of the rest will be remembered in a distorted fashion? As a result, students retain precious little information, and they have no conceptual tools for thinking about or acquiring new information.

Some reviewers of an earlier draft of this comment thought it might not be sufficiently controversial to elicit discussion. Maybe that is so. Maybe most everyone agrees with me. But if that is so, why is the bookstore full of the kinds of textbooks I have been talking about? Besides, even I often don't act as if I agree with what I have said here. For most of us, the use of comprehensive textbooks is a habit. We have always taught (and been taught) that way. Some of us blame the book rental system for our behavior. But how many of us make full use of the supplemental purchase option or our very fine library? Some of us like the multiple-choice test questions that are packaged with textbooks. While there is nothing inherently wrong with multiple-choice questions, good ones are difficult to write and the ones that accompany textbooks are usually the sorriest representatives of their kind. They provide a poor excuse for adopting a textbook approach. My guess as to why most of us use general textbooks is that the idea of teaching a course without one is simply too threatening

What can we as faculty members do about this state of affairs? When we can find them, we can use textbooks that are organized around the major concepts and issues central to an understanding of our fields, not ones that promote the unreflective transfer of information. Alternatively, topical textbooks rather than mini-encyclopedias can be used or the instructor can assign selected parts of textbooks along with extensive supplemental readings. Or, instructors can take advantage of commercial services that allow development of course-specific collections of readings. Faculty members can also begin to take on the admittedly entrenched practices of the textbook publishers. We can critically review manuscripts when given the opportunity, adopt textbooks that are unconventional, or even submit our own alternatives. In short, we can self-consciously attempt to overthrow the tyranny of the typical textbook.

Bruce Henderson, Psychology

Terry Nienhuis, Editor
Faculty Forum
Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence
Hunter Library

Dear Terry,

Here is my response to the November *Faculty Forum*.

Name _____

Department _____

Return this sheet to the FACULTY CENTER FOR TEACHING EXCELLENCE, Hunter Library

12

12

12