

Why We Won't See Textbooks in Our Disciplinary Rear View Mirror in the Near Future

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Although not everyone needs textbooks, they still actively serve four audiences within the discipline.

As I began writing this opinion piece about how and why textbooks are still useful to the discipline, I was a little worried. However, now that I'm working on the second edition of a coauthored textbook, I feel I can better discuss textbooks and how they function within the discipline. As I see it, there are four audiences that benefit from textbooks: students, instructors, the textbook sales force, and the textbook authors themselves.

First, and foremost, textbooks are about teaching students. What I sometimes think some of my more experienced colleagues forget is that a lot of times the textbook is doing its teaching when students are *away* from their instructors. I am not proclaiming that students keep their books and use them for instruction beyond the classroom; however, students do use their textbooks as a resource during the course. Granted, many articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* discuss how students do not purchase their textbooks anymore, usually due to the high cost; however, many instructors still assign readings and homework out of the textbook to be completed when students are out of the classroom and might have only the textbook available for support. With a growing number of online classes where students have less and less, or even no, face time with their instructors, textbooks and other well-constructed instructional materials become critical.

One of the easiest ways to demonstrate the importance of textbooks for students is by discussing what is missing when an instructor chooses not to use a textbook. I agree that one of the reasons faculty are starting to use Open Educational Resources (OERs) outside of the classroom is because students have access to them after the course ends (and they are usually cheaper as well). However, students do not know the course content as well as an instructor, even after the course. Textbooks function to ground disciplinary content pedagogically, providing introductions to the material, learning objectives, learning activities, and possibly even assessments. It is not that instructors can't contextualize OERs with appropriate pedagogical

materials; however, it is a lot of work to do so. Therefore, textbooks not only help students but also help instructors as well.

The first time I taught first-year composition (FYC) as a teaching assistant, I was very dependent on my textbook (the good ol' *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*—I still keep a copy of it to which I occasionally refer, just as I kept my handbook from when I was an undergrad). TAs are not the only “new” teachers out there, however. There are contingent faculty who have never taught before, contingent faculty who have never taught a specific curriculum before, even experienced teachers who have never taught a particular class before. Textbooks can also represent scholarly updates in the field, such as the shift to emphasizing genre as represented by *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*. Every time one of my colleagues talks about how using my coauthored textbook reinvigorated her teaching of second-semester FYC, I am both honored and reminded of how powerful a textbook can be for the instructor as well as the student.

When my textbook coauthor, Susan Miller-Cochran, and I wrote the first edition, we knew we were writing for teachers as well as students; however, there was one audience of which we were not aware: the textbook sales force. Readers of *TETYC* may not care as much about this particular audience, but it is still probably useful to acknowledge that experienced textbook authors are very aware that they have to educate the textbook company's sales force as well. Especially if the textbook presents something new, such as the genre emphasis mentioned above, the sales force needs to understand what makes it different so that they can at least highlight the difference while talking to faculty, writing program administrators, and textbook selection committees. I'll never forget one day when my coauthor and I were collaborating on the second edition and simultaneously noted that a particular page would be useful for our publisher's marketing and sales people to help distinguish our book from others as well as point out what would help facilitate student learning.

As a textbook author, I have greatly benefited from the textbook writing and revising process. Writing textbooks has also made me much more aware of how and why my students learn. Some of those same articles in the *Chronicle* and *Inside HE* discuss how inaccessible textbooks can be, either too boring or too steeped within the discipline in a way that does not allow easy access to novices such as students. As most experienced instructors know, teaching, whether face-to-face or through writing, requires a persona that balances expertise with accessibility in tone, language, and style.

Finally, textbook authors do not write textbooks for the fun of it! Don't get me wrong, they are compensated; however, most of the past and present textbook authors I know initially proposed their textbook ideas because what they wanted to do in their classes was not available in any other book. Experienced instructors know that no single textbook does *everything* they want for a class (heck, not even my own textbook does everything I want); that is why we usually supplement textbooks with handouts and Internet resources among other things. The tipping point comes when an instructor asks students to purchase rather expensive re-

sources, a textbook or two, and then does not explicitly use them in the classroom. Maybe then it is time to branch out and use OERs or propose writing your own textbook. ◀

Resources for Textbook Authors

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