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Learner Verification: Touchstone for Instructional Materials?

THE concept of learner verification was first proposed by P. Kenneth Komoski in testimony before the Select Subcommittee on Education and Labor of the U.S. Congress in 1971. At that time Mr. Komoski called for both educational producers and educational purchasers to dedicate themselves to improving the quality and reliability of curriculum materials by means of a continuous program of data gathering directly from the 50 million learners (elementary and secondary students) who use them.

In 1972, the state of California adopted a law which requires that producers gather and utilize such data in the learner verification and revision process described here. In recent months, other states have begun discussing legislation on learner verification.

Mr. Komoski is President/Director of the Educational Products Information Exchange Institute (EPIE), a nonprofit consumer-supported agency which is currently advising several states on the interpretation and application of the learner verification process on a *pro bono publico* basis.

GROWING interest in the learner verification of instructional materials by legislators, educators, and the education industry is a strong indicator that there is no product now in production or in use that does not stand to be substantially improved as a result of systematic feedback from learners. Such interest also indicates a growing awareness that every instruc-

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If the learner verification process is consistently and broadly applied by the education industry, and demanded by educational purchasers, an important step toward the continuous improvement of all curriculum materials will have been taken.

tional material must be continuously revised in light of the constantly-shifting needs of learners and the schools.

A spokesman for the Association of American Publishers recently indicated to a Florida Legislature Committee that the education industry is moving toward adoption of the learner verification process. To date, however, verification activities such as "field tests," "tryouts," or other forms of "formative evaluation" have been limited to measuring the effect-results of product use on learners during a product's prepublication period only.

The more comprehensive umbrella concept of learner verification calls for continuing the gathering of data from learners on both effective and affective results of a product's use both *before* and *after* publication, for as long as the product under consideration has "market life."

Such cradle-to-grave verification and revision become increasingly necessary in an educational system committed to instructing each and every individual in an accountable fashion. It is a practical means of developing and refining materials so that they can make it possible for teachers and students to do their jobs with the best possible tools we can give them.

EPIE's suggestions for the implementation of learner verification are based on the following six principles:

1. Learner verification is *not a means of certifying* once and for all the quality and reliability of an instructional material; *it is a means of developing, improving, and maintaining quality and reliability.*

2. Learner verification *provides the producers with the data and information they must have if they are going to make responsible statements about what their products will and will not do* when used as specified under particular instructional conditions.[1] However, learner verified claims are not the only information the purchaser must have to select from among competing products those which best match the needs of teachers and learners in a given curriculum area. (The other information required to carry out such selection is described in other EPIE documents.)

3. Learner verification is *continuous.* It should begin *now* for all instructional materials, whether they are in the development state or already on the educational market. *It continues for as long as the product remains on the market.*

4. Learner verification implies: (a) that *learners will be, in fact, not just in word, the primary source* of product improvement data; (b) that data from secondary sources (for example, teachers, parents, etc.) should be related to *specific learner behavior.*

5. All learner verification data *should be detailed enough to enable the producers to identify specific strong and weak points* in a product's internal structure and within its external context of use.

6. *Learner verification of a product is the producer's responsibility* and the data gathered are the producer's property. *Education agencies have a responsibility to permit producers to gather data from schools and a responsibility to demand evidence that the producers are employing valid procedures of data gathering and analysis* and that they are using the data to improve the effectiveness of their product.

[1] See: *Guidelines on Advertising Substantiation.* Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Document #0300-00365.

There's Still Time . . .

In just a few short weeks, March 9-13, educators from across the nation will gather in Anaheim, California, to confer on "Creating Curricula for Human Futures," at ASCD's 29th Annual Conference. If you are an ASCD member you should not pass up the chance to join your colleagues for these four days of educational activity geared to your professional needs and interests. If you know of non-members who would be interested in coming to the Conference, please tell them that they can register upon arrival in Anaheim. Also, they may contact the ASCD Housing Bureau directly to make hotel reservations. That address is P.O. Box 4270, Anaheim, California 92803. Telephone: (714) 533-5545.

Role of Producers

The guiding principle for publishers or manufacturers when deciding upon one of the many learner verification strategies available to them should be to obtain as much information as possible to supplement what is known about a product's strengths and weaknesses. Constraints of time, personnel, learner availability, and money will all have their effects on what producers can do at a given time. They must choose a strategy and data-gathering techniques that best fit the nature—and stage of development—of the material in question.

For example, a producer who in one year has quite appropriately conducted a year-long, nationwide, testing-in-depth of a new textbook may decide a year or so later (equally appropriately) to test a much smaller sample in greater detail as to why certain learners are having trouble with specific aspects of his previously more broadly tested material. Another producer may decide to develop a sound-filmstrip package in response to a pressing curriculum need. Because of a legitimate time constraint, he may have no time for a large-scale, in-depth, learner verification. All he has time for is a simple pre- and post-testing and an informal attitude measure of students in a few schools that agree to make pilot use of the materials. However, as the materials come to be broadly marketed and purchased, he should be ready to broaden his learner verification strategy to include not just more testing—but formal observation, questioning, and interviewing.

Data Gathering

EPIE's suggestions all point out that all data gathered by the producer should be primarily of a "fine-grain," specific nature, lending itself readily to use in the improvement of specific features of the internal (textual) construction of the material in question, or to specific external (contextual) aspects of its use in classrooms. These data, gathered *directly* from learners, may include the results of: criterion-referenced and group-normed tests; direct learner comments, written questionnaires, and individual and/or small group interviews. The requirement that primary data be gathered directly from learners in no way precludes the use of secondary data gathered from teachers, supervisors, parents, and all appropriate participants and observers of the teaching-learning process.

The all too typical tendency to gather data on materials from large-scale "field tests in average classrooms" and to report results in terms of gains in overall mean-score achievement on standardized tests fails to provide adequately detailed information by which the specific strengths and weaknesses of the material in question may be analyzed and improved. In short, all learner verification data should be directly related to the internal improvement of the material itself (textual improvement), or to the improvement of the material's context of use (contextual improvement). Contextual improvement includes the revision of teachers manuals, student handbooks, laboratory manuals, and the management procedures and teacher-training materials that may accompany a particular material.

As indicated earlier, any set of materials should be taken through continuing cycles of verification, analysis, and revision for the length of its market life. The time duration of each verification cycle will vary from one set of materials to another, however, since it is dependent on both (a) the size and complexity of the materials themselves and (b) the complexity of the development or revision process and the size of the budget available for it. Because a more detailed description of the entire process of learner verification cannot be included here, those interested in learning more about the process are invited to write the EPIE Institute, 463 West Street, New York, New York 10014.

The aim of learner verification is to get better instructional materials in the hands of learners and their teachers. If the learner verification process is consistently and broadly applied by the education industry, *and demanded by educational purchasers*, an important step toward the continuous improvement of all curriculum materials will have been taken. □