

American Textbooks: The First 200 Years

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When conflicting values and attitudes in curriculum are involved, textbooks are apt to become prime targets for criticism. Only through cooperative efforts can selection of these materials be kept at an effective and satisfying level.

THE textbooks utilized by the schools of a nation generally reflect the values and essential priorities of that society. Throughout early America, books emphasized what was important to the people. The *New England Primer*, the hornbook, and the catechism were included in the curriculum of the schools in order that the early colonists could propagate their religious teachings. The text materials used in the Boston Latin Grammar School included *Aesop's Fables*, Ward's *Latin Grammar*, Caesar's *Commentaries*, Tully's *Epistles*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil, and *Greek Grammar* (2). The entrance requirements of Harvard University for the year 1643 were concerned primarily with the knowledge that a student had attained in Latin and Greek. Thus, the study of religion, Latin, and Greek held top priority for many years.

The teaching of values through textbooks continued later on in the eighteenth century when newer editions of the *New England Primer* began to reflect patriotic sentiments about the new nation. After the Revolution, patriotism was found in statements such as "Great Washington brave, His

country did save." The *New England Primer* also exhorted pupils to learn their ABC's and not forever be a blockhead.

The *Primer*, however, began to fade into the background after the Revolution. More appealing reading books appeared on the scene. One of the most famous was Noah Webster's "blue-backed speller" entitled, *Elementary Spelling Book*, probably the most widely used schoolbook for the next hundred years. This book also emphasized patriotic and moralistic sentiments making everyone who came in contact with it aware of the importance of literacy to a nation.

McGuffey's graded readers, published in the 1830's and 1840's, placed emphasis on achievement and success through industry, sobriety, thrift, punctuality, and other essential virtues. These readers set before young Americans the ideals of achievement that aided greatly in modernizing and industrializing a young country (8). Another elementary textbook, *First Lessons in Political Economy*, written by Reverend John McVickar in 1835, spelled out a basic formula of hard work to be instilled by the school. Emphasis was placed on prudence, industriousness, resoluteness, achievement, and contentment (9). It is interesting to note that an estimated 12,000,000 copies of McGuffey's graded readers were sold between 1836 and

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1920 (3) thereby ensuring the teaching of the values of hard work and thrift to many generations of young Americans.

Evolution of a Textbook

At the center of the present day educational scene is the textbook. Cronbach (5) has stated that only the teacher and perhaps a chalkboard and writing materials are found as universally as the textbook in classrooms from the first grade through college. As an example of the evolution of textbooks, general biology offers an interesting historical study. The development of the general biology textbook can be traced as it evolved from earlier versions of botany, zoology, and physiology textbooks (13). Early writers seemed willing to present in their texts any new discovery of biological science that they thought would be generally accepted by the public. Many of the early textbook writers had no formal training and copyright laws had not been passed. Biological text materials were almost entirely descriptive with little treatment of theories. Some textbooks were written completely in question and answer form. These early texts were largely informational, utilitarian, superficial, and shallow. Virtually no suggestions for pupil activities entered the texts until after 1850. The five most frequently appearing aids in early biological textbooks were tables of content, prefaces, illustrations, notes, and review questions (11).

In format and design, these early textbooks were very different from the books of today. They were generally very small, with tiny print, and very few contained pictures,

A page from the *New England Primer*, first printed between 1685 and 1690.



charts, or graphs. The early texts did not require much pupil activity except memorization and the formal application of rules. The earliest botany texts appeared in 1814 and tended to be very technical and encyclopedic in nature with some drawings and photographs. Botany texts were earlier in providing student activities than the other science texts. The earliest zoology text appeared in 1846. One interesting feature of these books was the evolutionary change of titles, from natural history to zoology. Physiology textbooks were a late entry and most of them were written by medical doctors. For this reason, these texts were usually very technical in the treatment of physiology. By the turn of the century, these three distinct disciplines were blended into general biology.

Perhaps the first American biology textbook presenting a blended or unified organization was Needham's *General Biology* published in 1910 which included the following units: Interdependence of Organisms; The Simpler Organisms; Organic Evolution; Inheritance; The Life Cycle; Adjustment of Organisms to Environment; and Responsive Life of Organisms (4). Thus, general biology came into existence as a hybrid type of course and the three part arrangement (botany, zoology, physiology) of many textbooks lasted into the 1920's. Where the early texts had been content centered, the texts of the 1920's and 1930's became learner centered written by educators. By 1960, three groups collaborated to develop the BSCS materials. Teachers came out of the schools; educators came out of colleges and universities; scientists came out of their laboratories; the three groups together have begun to learn to communicate and collaborate in developing better textbooks for our schools (14). The development of textbooks that reflect the priorities of the nation is a recurring theme in the content analysis of textbooks in many disciplines.

Textbooks and Controversy

Wiles, in discussing the pragmatic approach to curriculum change, noted that

85 percent of classroom teachers follow the textbook and thereby honestly believe that the textbook adoption process is the major way curriculum content is changed (7). In a study of instructional practices, sponsored by the NEA Project on Instruction, principals rated the textbook as the resource most useful for a teaching program when compared with locally prepared materials, state courses of study, and materials prepared by professional organizations, educational foundations, and national studies (10).

Teachers, principals, parents, and students agree on the importance of textbooks and because of this, emotions can run high in textbook selection and adoption procedures. The embattled parents and school board members of Kanawha County, West Virginia, would attest to this phenomenon. This has occurred sporadically during the past two centuries. Historically, books dealing with controversial issues such as evolution, sex education, and certain novels have been attacked. When conflicting values and attitudes are involved, citizens who are normally not readily aroused voice their opinions about the textbooks their children are using at school.

Donelson (6) lists several categories of

"suspect" books: sex, war and peace, religion, sociology and race, language, drugs, and inappropriate adolescent behavior. When these topics occur, controversy may soon follow. Recently, a U.S. Commissioner of Education strongly advised textbook publishers to print only materials that do not insult the values of most parents, concentrating on good literature that will appeal to these parents without relying on blood and guts and street language for their own sake (12). It appears that everyone, from the Far Right to the Far Left, has strong preferences and opinions about the textbooks used in classrooms throughout the country. In spite of dissatisfaction, criticism, and demand for change, the textbook stands essentially unchallenged as the apparent core of the educational process (1).

The impact of textbooks on American schools for the past two centuries has been strong and it continues to be so. Because textbooks are concrete objects, the general public can more readily relate to them than to abstract theories. During the immediate future, cooperative efforts by educators, parents, students, and textbook publishers are essential in maintaining the effectiveness of textbooks used in the school.

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