ABSTRACT
              Learner verification, a process by which publishers
monitor the effectiveness of their products and strive to improve
their services to schools, is a practice that most companies take
seriously. The quality of educational materials may be ensured in
many ways: by analysis of sales, through firsthand investigation, and
by employing a system of evaluators within the school system. Two
case studies are described, one detailing the failure of a product
designed to aid in word recognition, the other outlining the use of
an independent research group to predict teacher and student
acceptance of a flexible instructional packet. While the analysis of
educational needs and the pretesting of instructional materials may
increase production costs, they can also prevent the proliferation of
irrelevant products. (KS)

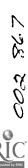## LEARNER VERIFICATION: A PUBLISHER'S CASE STUDY

George Wilson

There is a story of an unusual insect in the last issue of Natural

History. It seems that when conditions are favorable, these gall

midges breed and the young develop as larvae in the mother's body.

They grow by feeding on the mother until there is nothing left but

an empty shell. Now, that seems to be a strange story with which

to begin a discussion of learner verification and product development.

But, the gall midge larvae are not unlike the image some people have

of publishers. We're often pictured as a bunch of larvae ready to

feast on the educational community until there is nothing left but

a shell of uneducated kids. It's a myth perpetuated by people like

that testor of electric light bulbs who for $50 offers to tell you

which educational software tools are rip offs and which will work for

your students. And it's a picture of publishers that is leading to

some questionable legislation and questionable demands on publishers.

It's my goal today to try to present another view of publishing. It

is a view of concerned educators providing a service to schools, in

business at the will of the educational community, and only in business

so long as we provide a real service to you. The profit motive forces

us into this role. Because most publishers want to serve you in such

a way as to continue in business for the years to come.

2

In recent years, muchhas been made of the "learner verification" idea. It has appeared in legislation in a number of states, and is an expression of a very good idea -- that publishers have a responsibility to constantly monitor their products and to be constantly striving to improve their services to schools.

That's a re onsibility publishers have borne since they began, and one that most publishers take very seriously. But the present vagueness of "learner verification" requirements give us concern. First, because some of the reporting made for the sake of learner verification may be misleading. It would require much more massive studies than are required by current legislation to arrive at any high probability that any product would be effective in any given situation. And this kind of examination of products probably would not be cost effective either in terms of money invested by publishers ᵥ in terms of additional assurances to users of the materials. Statistics gathered in any form can be misleading. Who was it who described educational statistics as numbers that proved that something was significant even if it wasn't important?

Publishers go about ensuring the quality of their products in a variety of ways -- none of which are probably "real" learner verification. The company I represent is a comparatively small one, but we are probably not atypical in the methods we use.

First, most publishers are educators in a very real sense. Many people on publishing staffs are former teachers and administrators ... most of our editors and technicians are. For example, George Holland is our

English and humanities editor. He's a former teacher of English at the University of Arizona. Madeleine Shaw is a graduate of Brooklyn College and a former teacher in Brooklyn and in California. This previous educational experience lends perspective to the work, but beyond that, so what? You may be thinking of Sam, the old fellow who went to hear his friend Ed campaign for his umpteenth reelection to the legislature. Following a rousing speech full of political rhetoric, Ed felt comfortable in calling for a show of friends who would vote for him. Everyone raised his hand -- except Sam. The conversation went something like this. "Well, Sam, what's wrong? Haven't I worked to get the sewer line to your property? Didn't I protect your water rights? Aren't the schools your kids went to good? Didn't I control your taxes?" "Yes," said Sam. "Then why didn't you vote for me?" "Well, Ed," said Sam, "what have you done for me lately?"

People, even publishers are inclined to live in the present and to remember the extremes of the past. So it's easy, even for people like George and Madeleine to distort what kids can do, to redefine their skills in adult terms. We use a variety of ways to keep up with you today.

4

At BFA we like to think of something we call the BFA School System -- a growing list of school people around the country in which we have confidence and who we can call on for advice. We get hundreds of reports from these people. And we pay attention.

But our editors like first-hand information about their brainchildren. So they are constantly taking the new products out to try them in the schools. We formalize this a little more by lending our staff to schools as teacher aides part of every year. Right now, Joyce Moss is working in a third grade class and learning about one of our newest reading products.

Most of our testing is done after the project is completed; that's when it can really be tested as a whole. But it creates a real problem for publishers that requires your help.

Let me illustrate with a couple of histories of products we've produced. The first case is a product I can't show you because I don't know where it is. Three years ago, our BFA School System led us to believe that there was a need for some proven materials to teach word recognition. As often happens, we discovered that need at the same time someone else did. In this case, it was a group from a reading clinic with a program that used color coding to instruct kids about clues to word recognition. And they had students available to test the program as it developed. It seemed like a good idea, so we went ahead.

But we suspected that we were in trouble when we took the first

units out to see how our new product worked. In the first trial

group of six kids, no one seemed to need the instruction. In the

next group, one six year old followed the lesson for two or three

minutes then just got up and left. "That's all I'm going to do,

thank you." At least he was polite.

So we sent the units to five people around the country to be tried

in schools. Educators are notoriously polite -- but they weren't

about this project. So it never made the marketplace. Testing

products can be a very expensive activity.

Publishers ought to pay for their errors, and they do. BFA is not

large, but in the six years I've been associated there, we've chosen

to lose $500,000 in production costs on projects that we found didn't

meet our expectations.

But consider another example. The BFA School System told us two

years ago that classrooms were becoming more flexible. There was a

move to accountability as never before and teachers were meeting this

charge with a variety of teaching modes. So, we designed a program

that could be used in a variety of ways -- for class presentations,

for small groups, for individual study in a science corner...everything

color keyed so that teachers and students could easily identify the

parts needed for whatever mode...pre-tests, post-tests...everything

the teachers said they needed.

Sometimes in testing a product we don't trust our own biases. So we employed an independent research group to see if the product did what it was designed to do. They elicited reactions from 39 teachers and administrators, all of whom were certain that the product was what they needed. The research group then placed the package in 11 classrooms for a month of trial. It worked! Just the way it was supposed to work.

Now, in no way could anyone claim that what we did represented a very formal learner verification. But the small trial we made added 24 percent to the costs of developing the project. Sales indications are, so far, that we'll recover these costs about 1979. What went wrong? Who knows? Perhaps the subject matter. At any rate, we've tried again with a slight modification of the package in a program called POETRY TICKLES. I brought this program along in case anyone would like to listen and look and give us a little advice.

These two cases illustrate something we all need to consider. If learner verification in any form is to become a reality, someone will have to pay for it. At the least, schools will have to share by providing free access to schools for testing materials, and will have to express a decided preference for tested materials over untested materials. More formal verification will certainly result in higher prices, and may be very difficult to justify on the basis of cost-

effectiveness. After all, there is no absolute guarantee that a
product will work under all circumstances and for all of your
students.

Publishers, I believe, have responsibilities to help you by ana-
lyzing your needs before developing materials, and for testing
materials in development if possible, and certainly for measuring
effectiveness of the completed product. It is a lot easier task
if you can find an author with expertise in the subject and with
the facilities for testing the material during development. As
we developed the Comprehension Skills Lab, Dr. Martyn and his
team had already surveyed the reading needs and analyzed existing
tools. Some things were obvious -- kids were having trouble with
standardized tests of comprehension, and most products designed to
help could have used a little more real instruction to go with the
practice. The American Learning team produced what we think helps
with these problems. The emphasis is on comprehension, with inter-
esting new readings, and there is built in instruction -- even for
readers with very large difficulties. Now we're following up with
field tests. We have tested on small scales and now have the kits
in more than 100 schools for study.

I'll leave it to Dr. Martyn to tell about the problems of authors
in the development process, but this kit also illustrates a point
I would like to emphasize. BFA, like all publishers, is in the
business to make a profit. Our profit comes from providing real
services to the schools. The list of extinct companies who have

tried and failed to provide this service is large. We began with
the Comprehsnsion Skills Laboratory marketing in January, 1976,
with one kit. We want to make more. We want to be in business
for a long time -- in fact, we've just been struggling with our
plans for the next five years. As a service organization, we'll
provide whatever service is demanded by the schools that is
reasonab'e.

In the matter of learner verification, the problem is defining what
is reasonable and possible...and findi..g ways to cooperate with
the schools to maintain costs at an effective level.