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ABSTRACT

Although professors have been criticized for requiring the use of their own published textbooks in the classroom, this practice can be justified if certain ethical standards govern the choice. Granted that the philosophical congruity involved in such a choice guarantees a level of compatibility between the textbook and teacher, the use of text material must be consistent, well structured, and integrated into the course to permit its inclusion. Likewise, the needs of the students must be considered when judging the textbook's readability and appeal. The integrity of the instructor is most important in confirming ethical behavior; if the students feel that the course is well planned and that the instructor is dedicated to communicating with them, they will not readily oppose the adoption of the text for use in class. A possible aid to determining whether a text should be used in a particular course would be the establishment of a board of review that would rate materials according to the currency of the material, the depth and thoroughness of coverage, the overall value or worth of the effort, and the way that the material compares with other material selling in the same market. (MAI)

# ETHICS IN TEXTBOOK SELECTION: A PERSPECTIVE

by

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## Ethics in Textbook Selection: A Perspective

With the proliferation of basic textbooks it is no surprise that more and more professors are requiring their students to use the books they wrote. It is almost to the point in our profession that such situations are accepted standards of conduct. Is this right? That is the essential ethical issue. Should a professor impose his own book(s) on his students--students forced to purchase it if they want to complete the class and, perhaps, graduate. There is no question that students must buy books to pass courses and to graduate; the question is, should they be forced to purchase the professor's own work(s)? Underlying the question, of course, is the profit motive. The professor is earning money from the books sold. Can this be labelled exploitation? Does this conform to accepted professional standards of conduct?

The answer to the question is not clear. There are, perhaps, too many variables involved. Exploitation can be defined as "an unjust or improper use of another person for one's own profit." (Emphasis mine.)[1] It does not logically follow that because a professor makes money from the sale of a book--requiring students to purchase it--exploitation occurs. It is unfair to render a judgment without considering the subject matter, the audience for which the material is intended, the professor involved, and, too, the material in question.[2] That is, indeed, why the matter is complex.

What are some of the justifications for authors using their own books? Perhaps the most obvious one is the intuitive feeling that what is written is the best material available. It is easy to arrive at this conclusion because, in most cases, the author's substance is most closely related to the:

1. philosophy or approach that is most agreeable
2. needs of a specific course
3. needs of a particular audience

4. activities or experiences on a particular campus

It is likely to be the best available source if the writer took these specific needs into consideration when writing the book. This, of course, is not always the case.

In using the books of others, one may find himself or herself in opposition to all or part of the philosophical stance promoted, or more particularly, to specific concepts or ideas. This can be true, especially, if one teaches in a course where all sections must use the same textbook. It is easier, or more compatible, to teach from a source where this is unlikely to occur. To know what one has written and, more importantly, why one has written it, provides a sound, solid base which makes teaching both pleasant and consistent. It also guarantees a certain level of compatibility between textbook and teacher. For a director of a basic course, it makes it easier to explain and instruct others in the use of the written material.

In addition to philosophical congruity, authors may also structure a course to compliment a book, or vice versa. The point is that the choice of topics and the sequence of chapters is important to the flow and continuity of a course. One can, it is true, adapt a course to any text one selects, but it tends to be easier to adapt to material one accepts in toto, and to a book that is sequenced according to a structure or pattern that appears logical and justifiable. This is especially true when one's personal feelings, attitudes, and motivations are involved.

In some basic-communication course situations, the director attempts to coordinate lectures, readings, small-group sections, and the training of teaching assistants. He or she strives to establish continuity and consistency throughout. Philosophical or other particular incongruities between the director and the materials of the course may undermine his or her effectiveness.

At Bowling Green State University, the basic textbook is supplemented with a book of readings and a student manual. Also, a teacher's manual is designed to coordinate all these books for those who teach the course. The job of directing the basic course is facilitated and enhanced because of the director's belief in and emotional commitment to the material. Underlying theory and justifications for the material used is provided in a straightforward manner without hedging or equivocation. In a program the size of that at Bowling Green, this has proven effective and successful.

A minor example that may accrue when an author uses his or her own textbooks is that material may be tied to the local campus and audience. Examples and pictures may be immediate and relevant. This enhances the interest students have in the material and, too, the influence it has on them.

One goal of basic-course directors is to establish consistency between sections. With approximately 75-80 sections offered each quarter at Bowling Green, consistency is a necessity. Teaching assistants for the course come from such diverse areas as radio-television-film, theatre, communication disorders, and communication education (as well as interpersonal and public communication). When there are essentially no screening procedures to determine background or experience, one must have material (course content) that is thoroughly explained, laid out, and integrated. Given a brief amount of time to train teaching assistants, a director must have information that can be understood easily, grasped quickly and efficiently, and implemented with ease.

There is another question, too, that relates to acceptance; it is the other side of the coin. A professor can easily justify the use of the material, but his or her justification is likely to be questioned if students do not accept it or relate well to it. The question is, what is it that causes student acceptance of course materials? Related questions might be, should student

acceptance or judgment affect the choice of a book for a course? and Over the long run, should student disenchantment cause or provoke a change in materials selected? The answers to the latter two questions vary dramatically. The answers, however, depend in part on answers to the first question and the degree to which the teacher gathers and responds to this information.

There appear to be some essential criteria that determine student acceptance of course material. These criteria must be fulfilled by the material and the course. The following are some of them:

1. Students must like the material. Readibility is a major part of this. Examples that relate to them are also important. There is no question, too, that the content must be worthwhile. Students do not like to read common sense or material they have read many times elsewhere. An easy, comfortable flow of ideas that offers insights and practical suggestions appears to be what is appropriate.

2. Students also respond to material according to the degree to which it is used. They do not want to purchase books and materials that are only minimally or tangentially used or material that is irrelevant to what they are doing. It should also be integrated into their experience. When there is no correlation between student success--in a course or in life--and the material they are required to read, acceptance of the material is unlikely.

3. Students also accept books and materials based on the whole context in which it is used. Just as ethical behavior is more likely to grow out of a supportive situation or context, the integrity of the instructor and course are important to the acceptance of materials designed by the instructor for the course. Does the instructor reveal belief in and support of the material? Is the course philosophically sound? --Consistent? --Well structured and integrated?

The integrity of the instructor may be more important than one might think. There are several ways the instructor can (perhaps, should) strengthen his or her integrity. This is not to suggest fakery, it is simply to suggest that high instructor integrity tends to enhance course content and ideas as well as textbooks and materials. Whether teachers require students to purchase material they have produced or not, they should all be concerned with personal integrity building. Part of the way to "selling" integrity is through effective, well-planned, well-prepared courses. In addition, students:

1. respond positively to teachers who care about them

2. believe in a teacher who demonstrates the concepts, principles, and ideas being talked and read about. (We cannot discount the negative effect of hypocrisy as speech communicators. Teachers of communication must realise that they are the students' most immediate, accessible, and obvious model.)

3. react to lectures that are well-planned, structured, and delivered. There is likely to be a direct correlation between the time spent on lecture (or lesson) preparation and instructor integrity. It is assumed that time spent will result in higher quality and, thus, effectiveness.

The same qualities that encourage a proper communication spirit or climate when students speak in a public-communication setting, must be conveyed by the classroom teacher as well. The degree to which these characteristics are established, is often the degree to which ethical behavior is confirmed; that is, a teacher who is perceived to be operating in a proper communication spirit is less likely to be condemned for exploitation or other unethical conduct. To what extent is the instructor genuine? --direct, honest, and straightforward with students? To what extent does he or she (or <u>can</u> he or she) see things from the students' viewpoint? Students will respond positively to a teacher who can accurately reflect and clarify their feelings. Does the teacher value

other people for their worth and integrity as human beings? In all his or her communication, does the teacher embrace Goethe's maxim: "Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being." / Teachers who bring their total and authentic being to teaching situations are those who demonstrate a willingness to become involved with others fully. Integrity can also rest on the teachers willingness to view students as persons, not as objects. In general, students do not like it when teachers exercise power and superiority over them--when they impose their opinion, cause, and will. What this adds up to is: can the instructor develop and maintain a supportive psychological climate where free expression is allowed? Ethical behavior, as well as ethical judgments, result from a total impression, a feeling, or a spirit of mutual trust.

Beyond the classroom or lecture hall, instructors must also attempt to live the concepts, principles, and ideas. One must show concern for the students and their problems. One must be willing to go out of the way to help both the students taking and the teachers teaching a course. For a director of a basic-communication course, an in-class visitation program can be an aid to enhancing integrity. It allows the director to make suggestions to teaching assistants that will help them become better teachers. It also lets undergraduates know that the director cares about the course. Why would a visit be made if the director did not care? In-class visitations also help encourage continuity--getting teaching assistants to relate what they are doing to the lectures and to the readings.

It is often the gestalt impression that "sells" integrity; single, perhaps unrelated items, serve as the ingredients of that composite. Teachers are always on display. As communicators, they must strive to practice what they preach.

Satisfying the above factors is no guarantee that there will be no com-

plaints regarding a teacher's choice to adopt his or her own book(s). Complaints, however, are not only healthy, but providing channels whereby complaints can be made, actually helps the situation through cathartic release. Often, students in a course who are most disturbed about having to buy a professor's books are appeased, in part, if they have a way to vent their feelings and frustrations directly to the person in charge. It is not uncommon to hear students say, "...too complicated and BORING," "A waste...," or "This book puts me to sleep." When one considers how many students annually enroll in basic courses, one must expect complaints.

At Bowling Green, feedback is facilitated by incorporating feedback forms in the student manual. At two points during the course and one after it is over, students are asked to respond to both the teaching assistant and to the director. They are indeed honest and straightforward in their remarks, as indicated above. But much of the developing, changing, and growing that the basic-communication course at Bowling Green has experienced, has been in direct response to their comments. Integrity, thus, can be increased not through the solicitation of responses alone, but through what is done with the data that is accumulated.

Another factor that also increases the integrity of books used has to do with outside adoptions. If books are adopted on just the professor's own campus, more criticisms are likely to result than if he or she has established national visibility and a fairly extensive adoptions list. How many outside adoptions are necessary to establish credibility is a difficult question. The point is, however, if others feel that the material is worthwhile, that provides a better base of integrity than the professor's comments or support alone.

This need for recognition of worth by others can be a justification for directors of basic courses to establish advisory committees, or committees

whose sole purpose is the selection of textbooks and other materials. At Bowling Green, major decisions--including textbook selection--are processed through an advisory committee. Decisions about the basic course, then, are not unilateral. This provides a base that helps in the support of all course decisions, including the choice of material.

With more books being published, the problem of ethics or exploitation is increased. Professors feel comfortable using their own books because it makes teaching better, easier, and more efficient. But there are other issues involved than the professor's personal desires. As a possible aid to helping professors in this situation, this author suggests the need for a board of review to be established by the Speech Communication Association. This board would review all books published in the speech-communication field, and would rate the books. Ratings would be based on:

1. the currency of the material
2. the depth and thoroughness of coverage
3. the overall value or worth of the effort
4. the way the material compares with other material selling in the same market

Books to be used on a professor's campus would have to, first, satisfactorily pass such a review. This would give all people concerned a basis to judge the book. Members of the review committee would be elected by the membership. In reviewing a book, it would be clear that no board member would be allowed to have a book in the same market as the one being reviewed. Detailed, constructive reviews would be demanded, not just a rubber-stamp process that supports all publishing efforts.

The establishment of a board would not solve the problem of ethics or exploitation, but it would help increase the integrity of books required. That

is, it would serve as a means of obtaining critical, expert opinion with respect to books published in the field. It would provide a valuable service, as well, to those looking for books in a particular market. No author or company would be forced to submit a book for critical review, however, institutions could insist that such be the case in situations where a professor wished to adopt his or her own book. The institution, then, could decide what to do with the information gained from the board.

The question of exploitation is a real one, but just because profit is being made from the sale of book(s) to a teacher's students is not cause, alone, for the cry, "Exploitation!" There are elements to be considered besides profit in determining if a professor is unjustly or improperly using his or her students for personal gain. It is little different than when people cry "Unethical!" when an experimenter chooses to use human subjects in his or her research without examining the means and methods involved. To use a book one has written is not inherently unethical. It is, perhaps, much more damaging to students--and less in conformance with accepted professional standards of conduct--when a professor selects a textbook without <u>thoroughly</u> investigating the content, the various issues confronted in it and their implications, the trustworthiness of the facts and opinions espoused, and the degree and manner in which the author(s) acknowledges other alternatives, approaches, and philosophies. Proessors do make textbook choices without serious consideration of the selection and presentation of the facts and opinions between the covers or the degree to which sources of information and opinion are acknowledged. A professor who uses his or her own material is unlikely to be charged on <u>these</u> grounds.

The point of this discussion is simply that there are serious ethical questions involved in textbook selection; they do not necessarily revolve

around a professor's choice of his or her own material for a course--although they could. Generally, however, they are broader in their scope, and they involve many variables. For this reason, each situation must be judged on its own merits (or demerits). We must all, as professionals, conform to accepted, professional standards of conduct whether it be in adopting our own book for use in our courses, or in adopting any other book. Ethical behavior can and should be expected, and all teachers can and should be examined on the basis of whether or not they measure up. But in the area of textbook selection, the answer to the question, "Does this teacher measure up?" is based on the answers to many other questions. As George Edward Moore pointed out in his Principia Ethica, in 1903, ethical difficulties and disagreements are, generally, due to a very simple cause, attempting "to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer." This article has attempted to point out some of those areas on which questions can focus.

## Footnotes

[1] Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G.& C. Merriam Company, 1977), p. 404.

[2] The author has avoided the major problem regarding state law. States differ in their laws governing the professor's use of his or her own textbooks or in the use or distribution of profits from their sale. It is assumed, for the purposes of this article, that all laws are properly followed.