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ABSTRACT

Using a sample issue of the "Journal of Communication" as a point of comparison, a study examined the content of 10 introductory textbooks for the field of communication. Results indicated that textbooks scarcely ever acknowledge methodological pluralism, and when they do, they simply cite it as an existing factor in the field of communication and subsequently ignore it. The method and paradigm that drives the textbook itself is rarely acknowledged. Also, textbooks reduce scholarship to a few primary axioms, decontextualized, trivialized and simplified. To the student, these axioms seem to spring into being fully formed since the research and scholarly activity behind them are not conveyed. Textbook pedagogy seems to work from the assumption that students are empty when they come to the discipline and it is the job of the classroom--teacher and textbook--to fill this vacuum. But the truth is that students learn material in a more valuable and integrated way when they are permitted to discover connections for themselves. Finally, textbooks seem to represent the canon of communication studies, the pith of what scholars in this field can agree on. If this is the case, however, then: (1) What do they say about the discipline of communication and about the scholars and theorists in that field? (2) Do they encourage readers to be critical thinkers? (3) Do they offer historical, social and political and other types of background as context for what they discuss? or (4) Do they arrive with a hidden agenda? (TB)

Textbooks as Canon: The Relationship Between Introductory Textbooks and Scholarly Discourse

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What is canon and how do we determine where it lies when defining a discipline? Often we like to think that what we do as scholars defines the discipline and the ideas that will merit future attention with regard to that discipline. I propose that canon becomes carved in stone not through what we do but through what we teach and suggest that what we teach is rooted problematically in textbooks.

Not too long ago I completed a study of introductory communications textbooks with the purpose of comparing what appeared in the textbooks to the material appearing in scholarly journals in an attempt to understand the relationship between textbooks and scholarly discourse. The study showed that debate which appeared in scholarly journals rarely appeared in introductory textbooks. I will tell here what the study explored, what results it showed and finally, and I think most significantly, some questions it suggested that I have been thinking and talking about ever since.

For the purposes of the study I took a sample issue of the *Journal of Communication* and used it as a benchmark for scholarly activity in the field. I used an issue the Journal itself called a forum for major debate in the field: "Ferment in the Field." This particular issue was published ten years ago and contained 35 essays by 41 scholars in the field of communication writing on "the state of communications research today" (p.4). The study is based on the assumption that what researchers do is important in a field and that one can expect this activity to be presented to students wishing entry to the field. I then compared the activity reported in this journal to textbooks which appeared in the field subsequent to the journal's publication. I selected ten textbooks using a review of introductory communication textbooks (also appearing in the *Journal of Communication*), written by Pamela Shoemaker. She divides textbooks into three categories, I used six "theory" books, two "issue" textbooks and two "introductory" (Shoemaker, 1987). All of the textbooks used were published subsequent to the appearance of "Ferment in the Field," and in spite of the categories names given, all are introductory textbooks. I then compared the issues that were addressed by the scholars with the material presented in the textbooks. These bodies of material were compared in two ways: on the content level and on the pedagogic level.

The study is not meant to imply that what is offered for introductory study and mature scholarship should be the same. It does assume that the thought in which scholars engage is important for the field. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two bodies of text is that they ask their audiences to engage in two different activities. Scholars, presumably well versed in the theory and methods of the field, read to engage in debate about the current direction of the discipline. Conversely, students read to gain entry (which may be interpreted in several ways) to the discipline. Basically the articles

in "Ferment" address themselves four things: the examination of three types of history (the history of ideas in the field, the history of the relationship between communications and society, and the history of the parameters of the field), theoretical and methodological pluralism, the existence of debate in the field, and the ramifications of this debate for policy. The textbooks parallel the scholarship at some points and veer in different directions at other points.

There are two noticeable differences. One is the omission from the textbooks of any discussion of policy. Another is that the textbooks examine the history of communications technologies. None of the articles in "Ferment" even mention this aspect of history. Some of the textbooks do survey the history of ideas in the field, and some of them do examine the history of the parameters of the field as they struggle to define the field for their audience. The majority of the articles in "Ferment" engage in the debate about theoretical and methodological pluralism. Some of the textbooks note the existence of this debate, offering a section which defines what methodological debate is about, but they do not engage in such debate nor do they invite their readers to think along these lines. Finally some articles, as opposed to engaging in the actual debate, maintain that the existence of debate in the field is the major issue. This type of meta self-examination is beyond the scope of any of the textbooks. In the end the study shows that while the textbooks do make mention of some of the issues addressed by scholars, a significant difference occurs on the pedagogic level.

Every communication makes statements on two levels: the content level and the relationship level. That is, every communication says something and says something about the speaker's relationship with the audience. Textbooks are no exception. I'd like to look at three characteristics of these textbooks which have an impact on the pedagogy of these textbooks: their structure and format, their overt content, and the relationship messages in both these characteristics and on the implicit level. Because it so obviously sets them apart from other books, I will first look at the structure and format of textbooks. In brief these are the physical characteristics which are distinctive about textbooks. The physical appearance of the text is that of an off sized book. The text is laid out in a large column, leaving plenty of room for notes to be made by the reader along the side margins. The paper is heavy weight. There are divisions and subdivisions within the text. There are frequently questions at the ends of the chapters. There are also frequent side bars of text which usually provide examples of what the text is discussing. They frequently have glossaries. There is frequently a beginning letter to teachers and an introduction for the intended audience.

Textbooks are not inviting reading. One rarely picks one up and comments as to how much one would like to read it. Their format is forbidding, they put off their audience by there mere physical appearance. The format says " a lot of information is contained herein. Information which you don't yet know, but which you will ultimately be held responsible for." The end chapter questions say this, so do side bars which attempt to illustrate difficult concepts, and the space for notes The heavy paper says this book will be paged through again and again. The primary relationship message in the physical format and structure level is that of authority to subordinate. Certainly not surprising for a textbook.

The relationship level messages conveyed by the content of the textbooks is similar in tone. For instance, when methodological pluralism is acknowledged in the texts it is, in all save one instance, simply cited as an existing factor in the field of communication and subsequently ignored. Only in one textbook are other methods explained in a tone which suggests that there might be validity in other methods. In the four textbooks which acknowledge the possibility of other methodology the prevailing attitude is to explain that such a thing exists but to dismiss both the concept and other methodology as neither valid nor valuable. This internal disqualification is done in several ways.

The first and most significant way its done is that the method and paradigm which drives the book is, itself, rarely acknowledged. When this happens it seems to imply that other existing theoretical structures are paradigmatically different, but there is no theoretical agenda driving the text. Only three of the ten books say the points of view from which their books are written. One author maintains that he sees cultural relationships as systemic and that this is his approach to his text, but this is belied by his text which examines relationships only as unidirectional. Not in one of these books do the authors explain that paradigmatic structures involve basic assumptions about what is important and this drives decisions about what appears in the text and how. Since they don't do this, stating the name of the paradigm as they do is not tremendously helpful. When they are acknowledged tones toward competing paradigms or methodology, are frequently condescending or patronizing. Three authors devote some attention to alternative theoretical views in sections with names indicating it as an alternative theory section. Alternative theories are introduced and briefly explained. Research using them is not presented, nor are any examples provided of how they are best utilized. They are given unequal space and attention.

All the issue textbooks discuss the notion that assumptions about reality may be embedded in theory and method, but only one indicates any recognition of the

assumptions embedded in the theory that guides the composition of their own text. When these authors begin to discuss the limitations of theory and/or method not one of them discusses the limitations of assumptions embedded in the empirical method they validate. In doing this, these authors are stating one thing explicitly, that assumptions are embedded in theory, while implicitly invalidating it. It appears that views of other theoretical positions are colored by the position taken by the author. For instance, one author cannot see what is useful about Marxist thought because the lens through which he sees it, scientific method, renders it useless. This makes these texts guilty of ignoring exactly what they say they are trying to teach students to recognize critically: the existence of alternative method and the attendant implications. It is unfortunate that the intended audience, students cannot see this for they have neither the background nor the intentionality required of readers to apprehend it.

On the overt content level phrases such as "so-called" (Wright, 1986) are used. One author indicates that these ideas are of "varying status," (McQuail, 1987), while still another states that some alternative theories "fail" (Tan, 1985). So, while on the relationship level alternative theories are trivialized by receiving less space, or no space in some instances, on the content level they are often dismissed as not useful of limited use. Now I do not mean to imply that it is the obligation of every textbook author to give equal time to theories which do not inform his or her text, but it is, I think, imperative that textbook authors at least acknowledge that there is a paradigmatic structure which functions as a framework for their own thought. That this paradigm is not the only possibility may of may not be pointed out; but if it is such pointing out should be done respectfully.

The unspoken assumptions of a discipline, as Kuhn pointed out, are difficult enough to see, let alone question. When underlying assumptions are articulated and examined by the author it then becomes easier to show how agendas exist in other theoretical methods. Clearly seasoned scholars and introductory students do not have the same type of engagement in a discipline. But when a textbook offers contradictory messages it becomes difficult to explain the discipline. One must first explain the textbook.

How do we determine what is the accepted knowledge of the discipline when we face an introductory class? Certain names are associated with certain fields. What would the study of anthropology be, for instance, without Margaret Mead. Regardless of opinions on the validity of his theories, it is difficult to think of psychology without thinking of Freud. Students used to never get through an introductory English course without reading some Shakespeare. But what happens to these giants when they appear

in textbooks, when what we read is about their theories, but not written by them? I have not studied textbooks from these other disciplines, but I can speak to what happens in communications textbooks.

Much of what appears in textbooks is unattributed theory. For instance, some textbooks devoted long chapters to the study of media and culture from a George Gerbner-esque point of view but never acknowledge the author of this theory. In chapters on interpersonal communication many textbooks make great use of Edward Hall, never stating his name within the body of the text. This mode of presenting information makes it appear that these ways of thinking about the world are natural, that they have not been devised by a scholar working long, hard hours observing the world and reading many other books to aid in formulating these approaches. Research methodology is presented as if it were the only way to approach a problem. For instance, the two step flow model of understanding communication is presented without explaining how it arose or that it might not be appropriate for examining all types of communications situations. Sometimes even models which scholars have since stopped using are contained in these textbooks without any acknowledgment of their datedness. I even question whether or not the one book which does present, for example, the stimulus-response model with the qualification that it has undergone modification in recent years is serving its readers appropriately by including something which is no longer considered a useful tool, history of the discipline needs to be cast as history. Medical textbooks do not include theories about letting blood.

The problem here is a direct confrontation between a desire to include history in the textbooks and the problem which arises when texts include outdated models and theories. Students still approach textbooks with the attitude that what they contain is carved in stone. It is difficult for students to remember that what they are reading is not the only way possible no matter how many times an instructor may remind them that the text represents only a limited number of possibilities. Seeing outdated models in print, even if they are presented as no longer in use or in use with modification, can lead students to the believe that, while the text may qualify the presentation, it still believes the model else it would not appear in the first place. I suggest here one of our cultural bottom lines: if it's in print it must be true. It is even more difficult to suspend this cultural axiom for textbooks because they arrive encased in an aura of authority.

This attitude about print also comes to bear in the unattributed theory and ideas. If a theory, a model or a method is stated without attribution this creates an environment in which it seems to be naturally occurring and is without any informing paradigm.

Unattributed thought appears to be truth. Because this unattributed thought appears natural it seems not to have embedded within it any attitudes about the world.

Textbooks must make often tremendously difficult material easy to grasp by people who have little or no background in the field. A Herculean task which textbook authors rise to time after time. It is not, however, without its drawbacks. When hard scholarship is to made accessible to those who are not versed in a discipline's readings it must necessarily be simplified. This is, I am sure, one reason why so much scholarship is offered without attribution or adequate explanation of its origin. Another characteristic of the introductory text is the appearance of simple lists and surveys of an enormous amount of information. This information is frequently presented with little sense of the context which makes it useful or valid. Though the meshing together of many theoretical approaches, survey data, research results, and information about the current status of media development from a number of points of view, all that is presented tends to seem trivialized by being simplified and decontextualized. Additionally, hardly ever are any of the relationships between these aspects of communication studies explained. While this makes the material easier to manage, in presenting it all without showing how it is tied into itself -- and to other disciplines much sense of what it means is trivialized.

This is what happens to scholarship after it has been through the obstacle course required for entry into a textbook. It is almost always decontextualized, trivialized and simplified, and reduced to a few primary axioms. These axioms and models seem spring into being fully formed from no particular research or scholarly activity. This decontextualization gives them the appearance of a sort of absolute truth. To use McLuhan's framework, the message presented by the medium of textbooks is that of an authority speaking to an uninformed audience. All the characteristics I have described, among them simple explanations and definitions, sheer volume of information, and the fact that the presentation is rarely analytical but always descriptive, demonstrate this message. These qualities posit a teacher/authority-student relationship. This relationship is not, in itself, a problem. Textbooks are, after all, are for use by a novice audience. I see a problem in the presentation of the material, the engagement asked of the readers, and the question of what constitutes a discipline.

Presentation problems already reviewed include: the presentation of material as absolute truth without any acknowledgment of other perspectives, or of the assumptions which inform the scholarship offered or the manner in which selection is made. Physical presentational characteristics also contribute to the notion that textbooks are authorities which do not admit questions. As Jay Bolter says, the text gives the impression that the material has been "covered" and that there is nothing more to be said. They are, as Olson

says, "compilations of the given" (1988; p. 30). The presentation of our scholarly discourse in our journals, for example, is different because the very nature of the journal is that it is in flux. The appearance of responses to articles and responses to those responses indicates the existence of an ongoing dialogue -- quite different from what happens in textbooks.

The second problem is suggest is the engagement asked by textbooks of the readers. The pedagogy this type of instrument embodies the world view that students come to us empty and it is the job of the classroom -- teacher and textbook -- to fill this vacuum. This is a difficult problem because there is no doubt that a certain amount of background in a discipline is required before one can engage meaningfully with any of its concepts. It is the job of the introductory course to provide this background. How, then, to do this and still maintain the integrity of a classroom that values critical thinking? Students learn material in a more valuable and integrated way when they are encouraged to engage with it in a meaningful way, in a sense, when they are permitted to discover connections for themselves. Typical textbooks do not encourage this type of engagement. In fact I would be willing to argue that it is embedded in the very nature of the form "textbook" to discourage meaningful engagement with the material. This is not to say that textbook authors do not have the most honorable of intentions. I am suggesting a media determinist sort of attitude. The nature of the beast is to discourage critical thought and encourage activities such as rote memorization, understanding events, accomplishments, theories, models, and technologies apart from the context in which they occur, and an unexploratory attitude toward the material. Perhaps even more significant they encourage thinking about the discipline as a standardized and unchanging body of knowledge. This does not permit engagement with the material that will allow students to learn

The final aspect of the textbook problem has to do with what constitutes the discipline. What we do as scholars is in constant change, our journals and gatherings encourage debate, critical thought and remind us that the body of what we refer to as our scholarship is constantly called into question. This is what we do. Students are not privy to these activities and their texts encourage the attitude that what is in the book *is* the discipline. I suggest that this is, indeed, true: whatever is in the introductory texts constitutes the discipline -- all else is debate. We do not and cannot think of this debate as part of the canon because it is in constant flux and what is mutable cannot be canon. Neither do we find our canon in primary texts because they are so frequently inaccessible or obscure. Rather what constitutes our canon is what is in the introductory textbooks. This is the knowledge that is the core of what we talk about when we refer to our

discipline and the core of what we pass along to our "apprentices." More significantly it has passed the tests of relevance, understandability, and importance required for inclusion in a textbook as truth. Whether we value the criteria of those tests becomes, then, an issue for our scholarly debate. But our students are not privy to this. What we offer in our textbooks is what we have agreed or what has been agreed upon by default, is the background required for entry or pursuance of entry into our profession, whatever that profession is. This seems to be the only body of knowledge scholars in a discipline appear to agree upon. If that is so, then textbooks, introductory textbooks in particular, not any other collection of books or knowledge, constitute the canon of the discipline.

If textbooks are our canon it is important that we carefully examine the attitude toward scholarship that they encourage. We must ask questions like the following. Do they encourage readers to be critical thinkers? Do they offer historical, social, political and other types of background as context for what they discuss? Do they arrive with a hidden agenda? I am not sure what the answer to these questions would be were they to be directed at professional scholarship, I tend to think there would certainly be problems. My concern here, though, is with the pedagogy of what we offer our students. If textbooks are our canon they must be examined in that light. What do they say about our discipline and about us as scholars and theorists? If part of our job is to produce people who will have the ability to ask significant questions and struggle with real problems we must present material that encourages these attitudes about the world. One question that is begged by this examination is whether or not students should be exposed to debate which is current in the field. Or do they need a certain amount of background before they are asked to devise questions? Should textbooks include other perspectives? Should they reveal their own agenda? All these questions and others need careful examination. Certainly other variables exist which this presentation has not taken into account. Variables that are more significant than textbooks, the teacher's presence in the classroom, for instance, and how she chooses to conduct herself.

If our textbooks constitute our canon they are serving double duty, for certainly canon in other disciplines can be found in other places besides introductory textbooks. It can only be close to impossible to fulfill the requirements of both jobs: serving as collected wisdom and introducing new students to the field.

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