

Making the Most of Textbooks

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Abstract

In the post-modern world of technological advancement, teachers are facing new academic and pedagogical challenges due to rapidly changing educational trends and increasing competition. For satisfying the needs of learners, teachers are taking the support of various supplementary materials. However, textbooks have their own significance in the present education system. In support of this, the aim of this paper is to explore how one can make the most of textbooks. Firstly, the paper begins by defining textbooks from different perspectives. Secondly, it analyses the advantages and limitations of textbooks, and finally, it guides the ways to make the most of textbooks.

Introduction

A textbook is called 'the heart of the school' as it offers students a rich array of new and potentially interesting facts and opens the door to a world of fantastic experiences (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998. p.7). It becomes easy with textbooks to build students' knowledge and character. For doing so, teachers need a clear understanding of using textbooks effectively. However, in the beginning, it is important to understand the role of a textbook through its definitions

Defining textbook: According to Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, a textbook is defined as, "A book that teaches a particular subject and that is used especially in schools and colleges." (OALD, 2000, p.1238).

According to Webster's dictionary, a textbook is called, "A book used in the study of a subject: such as **a:** one containing a presentation of the principles of a subject **b:** a literary work relevant to the study of a subject."

According to the above definitions, a textbook is a medium to teach a particular subject in schools and colleges, and it could be a literary work related to a subject that has a presentation of the principles of the subject.

Advantages of Textbooks

A textbook is a collection of knowledge, concepts, and principles of a selected topic or course. It is usually written by one or more teachers, college professors, or education experts who are authorities in a specific field. Most textbooks are accompanied by teacher guides which provide supplementary teaching materials, ideas, and activities to use throughout the academic year. According to Richards (2001), there are many advantages of a textbook in the process of language teaching and learning

- **Organised units of work:**

The curriculum is developed by the educators after taking into consideration the background and level of the students. Based on the curriculum, they design the textbooks which help the teacher what is to be taught and how to teach in the class. Teaching without a textbook will create chaos in the class. Textbook controls this chaos and helps the teacher as well as learners in the teaching and learning process respectively.

- **Textbooks follow standardized instructions:**

Generally, a classroom has a heterogeneous group of students, but the textbook makes it a point that catches the attention of all the students. It standardizes the instructions i.e., it provides similar content to all the students. Textbook designers try to cater to the needs of learners across the states and across the nation. They make sure that throughout states and nation, learners are provided similar content, so learners can be tested and evaluated in the same way.

- **They maintain quality:**

Textbooks are considered the best materials for students and teachers. They are tested and tried out successfully in different parts of a country. They try to bring the culture into the classroom without hurting somebody's

feelings or beliefs. They not only bestow sound knowledge to the learners but also try to make them good human beings.

- **They provide a variety of learning resources:**
Textbooks provide a lot of learning resources in the form of supplementary materials or supplementary readers. They provide audio-visual materials with their manual. Many times, they instruct teachers on how to go about using various materials along with textbooks.
- **They are efficient:**
Some teachers waste much time assembling their own materials instead of making the most of the textbooks. The materials selected in the textbooks are chosen and tested by experts in the production of the material. They value the importance of teachers' time so they compile such materials that teachers will not waste their time in producing their own materials.
- **Balanced chronological presentation of information:**
Some textbooks come in series. Textbook writers put the content in chronological order for a better understanding of teachers and students. In language textbooks, authors generally keep balanced sequential order while including language skills. For example, reading and writing should be followed by listening and speaking.
- **Textbooks are economical:**
If we take into account the length of time, textbooks may be used and reused, actual per-pupil costs are low. And if we compare the cost of providing the content of a textbook in other forms, such as pamphlets, charts, or flat picture sets, textbooks are relatively inexpensive.
- **Textbooks help to individualize instruction:**
It is claimed that textbooks help to individualize instruction. With textbooks, it is possible for pupils to proceed at their own individual rates, according to their particular abilities, although in practice this may be done only infrequently. Textbooks enable different students to study different things at the same time or to repeat or restudy as often as is necessary at convenient times. Classes taught with the assistance of textbooks can be given varied assignments to meet individual requirements.
- **Tools of teacher training:**
Textbooks provide guidelines for teachers how to teach particular item or skill. Newly joined teachers may face difficulty while executing lesson plans. Textbooks provide lesson plans and give instruction of how to go with the plan. They also provide the list of supplementary readings for teachers. Moreover, they not only suggest supplementary materials but also guide teachers in building their own materials.
- **They provide language models and input:**
Textbooks provide support for teachers whose first language is not English and who may not be able to generate accurate language input on their own. For example, instructions given in the textbook help the teachers to teach it more effectively. In this way, these textbooks encourage a bilingual approach to English language teaching.
- **They are visually appealing:**
Textbook writers include a lot of pictures to attract learners' attention and these pictures motivate the learners to read text and enjoy the text. With the help of pictures, textbook writers provide conceptual input for reducing the learning burden.

Limitations of textbooks

No textbook is perfect. Textbook writers try to make textbooks the best source books of knowledge which can satisfy all types of learners. There are some limitations of textbooks, for example:

- **Textbooks may contain inauthentic language and irrelevant content:**
The textbooks may lead to irrelevant sources of texts, as the language and content used in the textbook are not interesting for learning. Students may find it boring and not interesting, and because of that language learning hampers. Some textbooks are true representatives of Western culture in the Indian context. Textbooks are supposed to use such content which represents students' own culture. Irrelevant content creates a learning burden. Instead of focusing on language skills, students get stuck in understanding the content.

- **Representation of an idealized world:**

Textbooks often present an idealized view of the world or fail to represent the real issues. In order to sell textbooks in large quantities, textbook writers focus on the portraying idealized middle-class view of the world. Reality gets hidden and controversial issues get suppressed.

- **Fail to satisfy students' needs:**

Textbooks are often written for the global market. Textbook producers do not hit on the students' needs. Moreover, they find it always difficult to satisfy the needs of all kinds of learners. Finally, learners end up adapting textbooks forcibly.

- **Loss of teachers' creativity:**

Some textbooks force teachers to use only textbooks because textbook producers portray their textbooks as unique and satisfactory. Teachers do not prepare their own materials which really help in different classrooms. In this way, teachers lose their creativity and become a strong followers of textbooks.

- **Reading to remember:**

It is stated that the presentation of text materials in logical, pre-digested form relieves the learner of the need to think, organize data, and arrive at independent conclusions. Under these circumstances, so the critics say, reading becomes more a matter of 'reading to remember' than of obtaining data with which to make decisions or to solve problems.

- **Textbooks become outdated quickly**

Frequent revisions are needed for many textbooks, sometimes long before they are worn out. Obviously, revisions take time and money which combined may cause schools to continue to use textbooks long after they are out of date.

Making the most of the textbooks

A textbook is only as good as the teacher who uses it. And it's important to remember that a textbook is just one tool, perhaps a very important tool, in your teaching materials. Sometimes, teachers over-rely on textbooks and don't consider other aids or other materials for the classroom. Some teachers reject a textbook approach to learning because the textbook is outdated or insufficiently covers a topic or a subject area.

As a teacher, you'll need to make many decisions, and one of those is how you want to use the textbook. As good as they may appear on the surface, textbooks do have some limitations. The following table lists some of the most common weaknesses of textbooks along with ways of overcoming those difficulties.

| Weakness | Student Difficulty | Ways of Overcoming the Problem |
|--|---|--|
| The textbook is designed as the sole source of information. | Students only see one perspective on a concept or issue. | Provide students with lots of information sources such as trade books, CD-ROMs, websites, encyclopaedias, etc. |
| The textbook is old or outdated. | Information shared with students is not current or relevant. | Use textbooks sparingly or supplement it with other materials. |
| Textbook questions tend to be low level or fact-based. | Students assume that learning is simply a collection of facts and figures. | Ask higher-level questions and provide creative thinking and problem-solving activities. |
| The textbook doesn't take students' background knowledge into account. | The teacher does not tailor lessons to the specific attributes and interests of students. | Discover what students know about a topic prior to teaching. Design the lesson based on that knowledge. |
| The reading level of the textbook is too difficult. | Students cannot read or understand important concepts. | Use lots of supplemental materials such as library books, the Internet, CD-ROMs, etc. |
| The textbook has all the answers to all the questions. | Students tend to see learning as an accumulation of correct answers. | Involve students in problem-solving activities, higher-level thinking questions, and extended activities. |

- **Think of the textbook as a tool**

It is a better way of thinking that textbooks are as good as the person using them. A hammer in the hands of a competent carpenter can be used to create a great cathedral or an exquisite piece of furniture. In the hands of someone else, the result may be a rundown shack or a rickety bench. How you decide to use textbooks will depend on many factors. Remember, no textbook is perfect, and no textbook is complete. It is but one resource at your disposal. Use it as a blueprint, a guidebook, or an outline.

It is advisable not to make the mistake of basing your entire classroom curriculum on a single textbook. The textbook needs to be used judiciously. A carpenter, for example, doesn't use only a hammer to build a magnificent oak chest. S/he may use a plane, chisel, saw, sander, or any number of tools to create the masterpiece S/he wishes to build. A great classroom program, just like a great piece of furniture, needs many tools in its construction.

When thinking about how you want to use textbooks, consider the following:

- Use the textbook as a resource for students, but not the only resource.
- Use a textbook as a guide, not a mandate, for instruction.
- Be free to modify, change, eliminate, or add to the material in the textbook.
- Supplement the textbook with lots of outside readings.
- Supplement teacher information in the textbook with teacher resource books; attendance at local, regional, or national conferences; articles in professional periodicals; and conversations with experienced teachers.

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