

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



What About Textbooks?

One of the perpetual components of a college education is the textbook. Traditionally, it is thought, students sign up for their courses and then make that dreaded trek to the bookstore where they pay large sums of money to purchase their textbooks. The other part of that story is the assumption (dare we say fantasy) of faculty members that students will actually buy, read, and digest the content of those purchased textbooks in some meaningful and lasting way. As we will discuss in this edition of *The ToolBox*, available research data may lead us to believe (or admit) otherwise.

To be sure, textbooks are often considered to be part of the culture of a college campus. Large, heavy textbooks are often perceived to be the calling card of a scholarly life. There is reason, however, to take a critical view of reality in regard to the assumptions guiding the use and selection of textbooks and their overall role in the learning process.

Assumption #1: Textbook production is a money-making industry. First and foremost, the people who publish and sell textbooks are in the business of generating profit. Their business is totally dependent upon attracting the attention of potential textbook adoptions by college faculty members. This is accomplished by clever marketing, the plentiful availability of examination copies, web site resources, and prefabricated test question banks. This observation is not intended to demean the textbook publishing industry. It is intended, however, to reinforce the idea of "Let the Buyer Beware." Be a wise and careful consumer and textbook adopter.

Assumption #2: Textbooks are a vital and integral part of the learning process in the courses that we teach. There is good reason to believe that this assumption is accurate. Quite often, courses are designed and offered in deference to the content and organizational structures found in the textbooks chosen by faculty. The sequence of events that typically transpires is:

- Faculty members select a textbook (or textbooks) that provides the best coverage of the topics to be covered in the course.
- Lectures and tests are designed in accordance with the sequence of chapters found in the chosen textbook(s).
- The course schedule is created based upon the sequence of chapters as they appear in the textbook.

The logical next question becomes whether these decisions about textbook selection impact student learning in the ways that we might envision and hope to realize.

Assumption #3 Students actually read their textbooks. The research available on the textbook reading habits of college students is remarkably scarce. What is available, however, is rather disturbing. A study by Connor-Greene (2000) revealed that 72% of surveyed students never read their assignments by the due date. In another study, Sikorski et al.(2001) found that as many as 30% of the students surveyed indicated that they did not purchase a text for at least one of their scheduled courses. Clump, Bauer, and Bradley (2004) report that many college students spend less than three hours per week reading assigned textbook materials.

Assumption #4: The question "Will this be on the test" is actually an indication of dedication and motivation on the part of the student as learner. Although many students are committed to learning, there is also a sizeable group of students who are interested in doing only what is necessary to "pass" certain courses. One question to consider, however, is the source of the questions that are "on the test." Do they come from class lectures, the text, or both?

Assumption #5 There are no other options to consider. We need textbooks in our courses. Textbooks and other reading materials are critically important to the learning process. Through these resources, students not only acquire new information but also learn the important skill of searching and seeking answers to the predominant questions in their field of study.

Clump, M., Bauer, H., & Bradley, C. (2004). The extent to which psychology students read textbooks: A multiple class analysis of reading across the psychology curriculum. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 31(3), 227-232.

Connor-Greene, P. (2000). Assessing and promoting student learning: Blurring the line between teaching and testing. *Teaching of Psychology*, 27(2), 84-88.

Sikorski, J., Rich, K., Saville, B., Buskist, W., Drogan, O., & Davis, S. (2002). Student use of introductory texts: Comparative survey findings from two universities. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29(4), 312.

Encouraging Students to Make Reading an Integral Part of Their College Learning Experience

Here are some strategies designed to increase the likelihood that your students will take advantage of the reading materials that are included in your courses:

Assign Course-Related Point Values to Assigned Readings Surprisingly, and quite often, the expectation that students are actually required to read the assigned text is implied but not specifically stated. Students may, therefore, often assume that as long as they acquire the necessary material that reading the text is merely an optional experience. By stating that course-related points are available for reading the textbook as assigned and in a timely manner, any misunderstandings are eliminated. At the end of the semester, students are asked to sign a document on which they indicate the number of points (e.g., 80/100) that they are entitled to receive. Interestingly, students have frequently been observed downgrading the points they receive, based upon the level of work that they have done, even at the cost of earning a lower grade.

Consider Using Journal Article Collections as an Alternative to Published Textbooks With the advent of electronic databases, it is possible to create a customized, internet-based reading collection of full-text articles from a variety of journals and authors. This practice provides a means for the selection of reading assignments that are more current and timely than textbooks, present varied and opposing viewpoints on the topics of discussion, expose students to the direct work of experts in the field, and provide a means for more in-depth investigations of key course issues. A single textbook cannot accomplish these outcomes.

Assure That Lectures Are Only Supplements to Assigned Reading Quite often, there is a high degree of overlap between the materials contained in assigned readings and the content of classroom lectures. Students are quick to realize this condition and draw the conclusion that listening in class (and perhaps taking notes) is a more efficient strategy than listening in class and reading the assigned materials. For faculty members, it is a good idea to conduct a periodic check to determine the level of overlap between lectures and readings.

Reference Lectures to Information and Illustrations Contained in the Course Texts During classroom discussions and lectures, consider making frequent references to the materials covered in assigned textbooks. This strategy provides a coherent and comprehensive picture of course content and subtly reinforces the faculty member's commitment to both sources of learning and information.

Consider the Use of Occasional Open-Book Tests There are times in every class and every discipline when application of course content is more critical than recognition or recall of facts and concepts. At these times, students can be given questions or scenarios to resolve with the information contained in their textbook.

Give Quizzes on Assigned Reading Materials One way of encouraging students to read the assigned course materials (e.g., text chapter, journal article, web-based information) is to schedule accountability procedures during class (e.g., group discussions on reading assignments, quizzes).

Provide Written Study Guides That Correspond With Assigned Course Readings

In every course there are key pieces of information, concepts, and facts that are crucial (and that often form the core of examinations and evaluation procedures). Study guides provide students with a means for focusing their attention and effort. If a portion of the information contained in the study guide can only be found in the textbook, then students will need to explore and understand that information by using their textbook as a resource.



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