

Monday, March 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Textbook Adoption: Blessing or Curse?

Ominous thunderclouds often herald Springtime, a time when Spring rains promote flowers (and weeds). Spring often sees teachers asked (ordered, volunteered) to research textbooks for a "new adoption. Whether the adopted textbook produces a bounty of positive student learning outcomes, or is just so much "spin, fluff and sales-talk", is up to you (and the committee, or the district's politics).

Unfortunately, researching anything at the time when high-stakes testing looms larger than those thunderheads is a distraction, (as if the high-stakes tests were not distraction enough from your important curriculum). Sidebar Sure, student outcomes and content-area learning are important for your students' life-long economic welfare. But, keeping your job is crucial to your immediate, bill-paying, food-on-the-table needs.

Capitulating to the "Teach-to-the-test pressures" is a "no-brainer" when perceived in light of "full-stomach, roof-over-your-head" pressures. However, textbook adoption stakes are high, too.

Choose unwisely, and you are fated to trudge a rut of your own choosing for years to come, i.e., most textbook adoptions run from three to five years. Can you stand using an "albatross around your neck" textbook for so long? The Textbook Selection Process The textbook selection process varies, depending upon whether the state purchases textbooks (such as California and Texas), and the selection is among a set of "optimized of the state" selections; or a wide open, free-for all. Sometimes teachers receive "free samples" that they don't have to return to the publisher, sometimes they have to give these back

Sometimes the publisher invites textbook committee members to a "free training seminar" (thinly disguised sales presentation) and "free lunch" at a nice local hotel

Sometimes the textbook publisher invites Directors and Principals to lavish "learning" opportunities

Sometimes promised training and "free" technology add-ons don't arrive after the textbook is adopted (get these agreements in writing before signing the official "adoption papers")

Sometimes the textbook publisher employs real teacher "consultants" who can afford to leave their classrooms and conduct the textbook training (Imagine how much the consultant teacher must be paid to be able to leave their classrooms)

Most times the hints of how easy the textbook is to use, and how successful students are in learning the content of the textbook require objective evidence

Most times the textbook content, value, usability and add-on features differ little (in terms of actual benefits) from competitors' products Pitfalls of Textbook Selection The major pitfall of textbook selection stems from "buying in" to the psychological belief that you "made the right decision," then attempting to defend the decision once the books arrive and the promises for huge student performance gains fail to develop.

There is a psychological principle that describes the defense mechanism that "twists our evaluation of basically similar items" and convinces us that the item that we chose is superior to all the others (that we didn't choose). Avoid this fallacy. The adoption choice textbook candidates were essentially equivalent before you chose. They remain essentially similar after one was selected.

Another pitfall for making a textbook choice is the fallout that you might receive for the next three years (depending upon your rank and standing in the campus clique structure. If you are "top dog" in rank, you may be immune to overt criticism, but if you are an "underdog," be prepared to shoulder blame for years to come.

Yet another pitfall is the tendency to act upon the "hype and spin" of the textbook publishers' marketing materials and sales representative's "representation" about the quality, soundness and research-validated features (that underpin the foundations of the textbook). If this language sounds like "long-winded drivel," why didn't you notice the stripes, spots and blemishes about this textbooks instead of letting the textbook representative camouflage these flaws by their sales and marketing language? Take heed when the publishers representative represent the product to you. Why? They are representing "to you" but "for the textbook publisher."

Whose welfare is the representative's first priority? What sales and marketing methods did the publishers representatives use to convince you?

Sidebar Explaining the details of the many pitfalls of the textbook selection process would require a book, not a newsletter article. Instead, refer to these resources... Textbooks in the Age of Standards

Another criticism of US textbooks is the "Mile Wide and an Inch Deep" catch phrase coined by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Textbook Reps: Spin, Slight-of-Hand, Nuance-Based Obfuscation Remember that the publishers' textbook representatives have to put food on their tables and roof over their head, so they often speak with "less than forthcoming" accuracy portraying the "closeness of fit" between the product that they are pushing and your students' learning needs.

Caveat Emptor (buyer beware) is important if you are only "buying-in" instead of purchasing.

Exercise the same caution in adopting a textbook as you would in purchasing a new car. Technology Enhancements: Real Honey or Artificial Sweeteners Avoid any textbook decision that is based upon promised technology enhancements that come free, or are bundled with the textbook for an additional cost.

The "free" materials are seldom a bargain, and often consist of outdated technology and unsold materials that the publisher wants to "dump."

Be sure to obtain Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for any server-based technology enhancements; and, if the technology enhancements do not include server-based components, consider them to be "almost worthless" to your teaching program.

The reason that technology enhancements (such as one CD that you can copy, or one CD that you can install on as many computers as you wish) is that your school district's IT Department does not have the staff to tinker with individual installations on selected computers.

In addition, the IT Staff cannot devote the time to testing and creating an image for the hard drive of a system unless every computer that the system will be installed on is exactly the same. Server-based in stallions resolve this issue and create a scenario that is more likely to ensure that the add-on components can be used.

Another issue with the use of these technology "freebies" is compatibility with the computers that teachers use at home. Since most of the preparation and planning work that teachers perform is done at home, there must be a way for teachers to preview the technology materials and programs, and there must be a way for teachers to use, add to, or create test bank items. Sidebar Classroom Toolkit explained the contrasting roles of instruction and technology in our article, Teachers to IT Departments: "You have Homework" . Link to the article...

The upshot: never purchase a textbook based upon promises of technology add-ons.

Set objectives and targets for measurable student outcomes before sitting at the table with the prospective textbook publisher's representative (Rep).

Ensure that the textbook targets your measurable outcome objectives, then ask exactly how the add-on "technology toys" move (enhance, expand, augment, extend) the textbook with additional student outcome improvements.

Hint: Publishers throw a lot of "bonus features" into the textbook adoption mix, and most of those "deal sweeteners" are "junk" that "turns sour" when teachers attempt to make use of them.

Due Diligence Due diligence is difficult for public school teachers since few teachers have the luxury of: Visiting other districts with the same student demographic to observe the textbook in use and to examine the student learning improvement data

Enough authority to speak to program directors and high-level district administrators

Discussing the textbook adoption with school board members

Discussing the implementation of the add-on technology with other school district's network engineers and support technicians.

Due diligence is difficult, especially when factoring technology into the adoption equation because of the roles of IT Specialists and Teachers. In most cases, these roles are contaminated, and important boundaries are breached. Sidebar Classroom Toolkit explored the roles of IT Specialists and Teachers in the article, Teachers to IT Departments: "You have Homework" In particular, the section on "Obtain Requirements and Specifications from Educators" describes how educators should never "prescribe" technology, and how IT Staff should never "prescribe" technology solutions to education. The proper role for teachers is to develop instructional objectives including requirements, specifications and target student outcomes. It is then the IT Staff's job of developing a project based upon delivering and measuring those student-performance, outcome-based measures. When either teachers or IT Staff members overstep these boundaries, fail to specify exactly what students will learn and how that learning will be measured; then the investment in technology (or the investment in free textbook add-in enhancements) falls short. So, as the "Who wants to volunteer to be on the textbook adoption committee?" bait is cast into the faculty meeting sea; keep the hook out of your mouth by keeping your mouth shut.

Enter the waters of the textbook adoption with trepidation, and if you can't swim with sharks, alligators, barracuda and stingrays; don't go wading.

The water is deeper than you think, and the chance that you will wander in "way over your head" is great.

We know that adopting a new textbook is a "dirty job" that someone has to do, so just be careful that the "dirty job" doesn't soil your job security and career advancement.

Proceed with caution in any dalliance with the textbook adoption. It's safer that way.