

Writing Textbooks: Why Doesn't It Count?

May 19, 2004

In 1975 I was an assistant professor at Purdue University and in my third year on the faculty. One day my colleague Barry Kantowitz came to see me with a proposal: Would I be interested in joining him in writing a textbook on experimental psychology? He sketched his ideas for the book, which sounded exciting, but then gave me some advice that surprised me. Barry told me I should think carefully about writing a book because I didn't have tenure. Textbooks, he said, have a low standing in academia at research universities and not only would writing a text not help me get tenure, it could actually hurt, because many of my senior colleagues might see it as a frivolous activity. A young assistant professor should be doing research and writing research articles, not frittering away time writing a textbook.

I found this news surprising at the time, but in checking with other colleagues, I found it accurate (at least in research universities. The situation may be different in other realms of higher education). Having spent 30 years in academia and having served on a variety of university promotion and tenure committees, the negative attitude towards text writing is pervasive. At least at research universities, textbook writing is not valued as a scholarly activity. I've never figured out why. Great textbooks are tremendously important in attracting students to any discipline. Of course, some colleagues are envious that the text writer is making money, but actually I suspect that few textbook writers make extraordinary amounts of money. (Yes, a few do).

I did choose to write the textbook with Barry Kantowitz and in fact the eighth edition of the book, *Experimental Psychology: Understanding Psychological Research*, is coming out this summer (Wadsworth Publishing Co.), which is in part why I have been reflecting on textbook writing. (David Elmes is now the third author on the book and so the authors are Kantowitz, Roediger, and Elmes). I did receive tenure at Purdue, but I doubt that the textbook did much to help my case and it may, as Barry warned, have even harmed my case. However, as long as one gets a good amount of research done and enough articles out, having a textbook is probably not a huge issue with most senior faculty, neither helping nor hurting the case. But why shouldn't writing a textbook be viewed as quite positive in higher education?

I have personally found textbook writing rewarding and have co-authored two other texts, although the proceeds have not exactly changed my standard of living (with royalties split among co-authors). However, the rewards were largely non-monetary. I learned a tremendous amount in writing these books and enjoyed thinking through some issues in ways that would not have occurred otherwise. I think writing the books has made me a better researcher and certainly more knowledgeable about my field. Writing three textbooks has certainly made me a better writer, too, with much advice from reviewers, copyeditors, editors, and students. Textbook writing has been but one facet of my professional career and not the central one, but I have still enjoyed it.

Teaching is the watchword in education today. Every university strives to improve undergraduate education, and teaching awards abound on every campus. However, the greatest teacher at any one

university will affect, at most, only a few hundred students per year. Textbook writing is properly considered as a form of teaching on a grander, worldwide, scale. A wonderful introductory textbook may lead hundreds of thousands of students to psychology over its many editions, students who might otherwise not have been attracted to the field.

Most students can point to a few great professors who inspired them as undergraduate or graduate students. However, the same is true of textbooks. I can recall several high school and undergraduate courses in which I had lackluster instructors but found that the textbook itself was inspiring and made the course worthwhile. A prime example of how a textbook can matter comes from my undergraduate years at Washington & Lee University. The Department of Psychology was small at the time (it's much larger now), and no social psychology course was offered. As an undergraduate, my interests rotated among Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology, and so I thought social psychology might be the right field for me. But how to find out? One of my mentors suggested that I read the recently published textbook, *Social Psychology*, by Roger Brown (Free Press, 1965) and I did one summer. I wound up applying to Yale in social psychology the next year largely because that book was so beautifully written, so interesting and covered many topics that I found fascinating. When I got to Yale, the faculty told me that Brown's book was as much about cognitive psychology as about social psychology. I eventually migrated to cognitive psychology, but Brown's book (even without a course or a professor) worked its spell on me. (The field of social cognition emerged later, in the 1970s).

Now, readers of my column could reject my thesis that textbook writing is under appreciated. The counterargument might be that textbook writing is obviously valued. Look at all the famous psychologists who have written textbooks. (After all, Brown was a professor at Harvard when he wrote his book). Yes, that is true; point well taken. However, practically all of these psychologists became famous and only then wrote their textbooks. They did not achieve fame by writing a textbook. Perhaps that is as it should be, at research universities, but I personally think that we should value the authors of brilliant textbooks that help to define the field, to attract generations of students to the field, and perhaps even to change its course. Some months ago, an article in the March 2003 APS *Observer* provided favorite textbooks of some psychologists. Besides Brown's book, two that greatly influenced me and my field were Ulric Neisser's *Cognitive Psychology* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967) and Robert Crowder's *Principles of Learning and Memory* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 1976).

While we are saluting textbook authors, we should especially honor David Myers. He is a well known researcher, serves on editorial boards, teaches at Hope College, and has written best-selling textbooks in introductory psychology and social psychology and has also written popular trade books to explain psychology to a wider audience. He and his wife Carol are, as described in last month's *Observer*, sowing their royalties back into the teaching and dissemination of psychology. So, hurrah for the authors of great textbooks, and for David Myers in particular, for his magnificent gift to all of psychology. He sets a model for all of us to follow by returning a wonderful gift to the field.