

The Fallacy of Textbooks

Covering the textbook is not effective teaching. Read why in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 17 at EffectiveTeaching.com.

Textbooks are important, but they are not the curriculum, nor should they be used in lieu of good teaching.

Covering the textbook is not effective teaching.

Regretfully, in many classrooms the textbook is the curriculum. The publisher runs the classroom, not the teacher—and these teachers believe the fallacies below are true.

- A committee's or teacher's choice of a textbook is the single most important decision in establishing the curriculum.
- The curriculum is a set of knowledge and skills packaged in a textbook.
- Teachers should base their instruction on covering—and hence being imprisoned by—a single textbook.
- Teachers should have faith in the textbook. Some even lament, "If only the right one could be found!"
- Students are trained to seek the "right" answer from the textbook.
- All supplementary activities add to the textbook.

Although teachers express concern for student attitudes and complaints that class is boring, they continue to be imprisoned by the traditional teaching model—assign, recite, and test—all based on the textbook.

A teacher's reliance on the textbook may reflect an inability to conceptualize the content of the curriculum, the purpose of education, and the practices and procedures associated with student learning.

The Textbook Is Not the Curriculum

What you need from the district is a curriculum guide that is aligned to state standards, rather than simply a textbook. Textbooks are fine as supplements to the curriculum guide.

It really is a no-brainer. A district without a set of curriculum guides for each grade level and subject is like a restaurant with no recipes or an orchestra without sheet music. Can you imagine a restaurant owner telling the cooks they can prepare anything they want, or a conductor telling the musicians to make up the melody as they play their instruments? When you encounter a school district without a curriculum guide, you wonder what the students have been learning all these years.

When Rosemary was hired as a new teacher to teach sixth grade, she asked the principal for a guide that would tell what she was supposed to teach. She assumed the district or the school had a guide. After all, she was told by her college professors to ask for a curriculum guide.

The principal told Rosemary to see the other sixth grade teacher, so she searched him out and asked for a copy of the curriculum. The teacher pointed to his set of sixth grade textbooks sitting on a shelf. “That’s it,” he said, and walked out.

As for books for Rosemary’s students, she didn’t even know where they were. She had to hunt them down. No one ever told her what learning she had to teach. She never saw a district curriculum guide. There was none.

The textbook is not the curriculum. It should not be followed, chapter after chapter. **The purpose of a textbook is to supplement the district curriculum and the creativity of the teacher.** It is imperative that you ask for the curriculum guide first, before asking for the textbooks.

Even in the present era of standards and accountability measures, it is common for most new teachers to receive little or no guidance about what to teach or how to teach it. Instead, they are left to struggle daily, to haphazardly prepare content and materials with no organized, coherent district or school plan specifying what is to be taught. New teachers do not complain about the lack of freedom to be creative. Rather, they want a curriculum guide that states both what to teach and how to teach it, at least to get them started. Creativity can and will come later.

Rosemary says her school had “no set curriculum.” No one told her what she was supposed to teach. She had no idea what had been taught the year prior; she didn’t even know what the other sixth grade teacher was teaching. She was **“lost at sea”** without a compass to use for direction.

She described her first year as frightening, where nothing was coherent or logically integrated. Accountability and standards were the last thing on her mind.

Role of the Textbook

The common lament of teachers is, “I don’t have time to “cover” the textbook.” If the objective is to cover the textbook, then no tests should be given to the students because their learning has nothing to do with covering the textbook. COVERING the textbook is not the curriculum, and no scores or grades should ever be recorded for the teacher’s ability to simply cover something.

The textbook is one of many from a pool of resources used by effective teachers to impart the curriculum of the district. The effective teacher synthesizes the best from all available media—textbooks, videos, the Internet, etc.—to compose a lesson rich in information and creatively packaged to stimulate the students to learn.