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Teaching to the Grain

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Textbook publishing represents “big business” in the field of education. Over the decades I have sat on several textbook adoption committees, and I once heard that the major publishing houses cater primarily to the states of Texas and California (because of sheer numbers, which translates to big profit margins in sales), and then promote their products to schools in the other 48 states. Often books are produced by a panel of editors who are on the fast track to “tenure” at prestigious colleges around the country, and are, themselves, steeped in conducting and interpreting the latest cutting-edge research, which serves as the vehicle to get them to the top of their field as fast as possible.

The way the process works is about every four to seven years, schools will look to revise the curriculum of a subject area. The process is cyclical in that every year or two a different subject is up for examination and possible renewal. In any given adoption year, the market is “up for grabs.” The publishers’ objectives are two-fold: to keep the markets they have previously had, while capturing new markets (held by competitors). How is this best done? It is done by presenting products that embody the newest trends in a particular field. We commonly refer to these frills as “bells and whistles,” and many a curriculum committee has been lured away from what, last cycle, was “the best” in favor of what is now on the cutting edge. In fact, some school districts will scrap the edition they adopted in the last cycle in favor of the updated edition from the same publisher, costing themselves tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. The publisher who appeals to the widest audience comes out on top.

In an industry intent on capturing the biggest market share possible, some basic truths about young learners tend to get lost in the hullabaloo of attempting to produce textbook packages with every possible connection to whatever is trendy. **Truth #1:** As a whole, young children are not able to think abstractly, hypothetically, or deductively. According to the extensive studies in cognitive development by renowned 20th century Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, most children reach the formal operational stage of thought at about age 11, but these developmental abilities can emerge as late as age 14 or 15. Prior to reaching this stage of development,

children do best with “concrete” learning experiences and concepts. That said, textbooks that move the bar in their attempt to appear to be “cutting edge” present material that students can often learn to do without learning to understand the underlying concept, and if they can’t understand it, they can’t transfer the process to novel situations. (We often see this in new students who have been taught mathematics via “common core” methodology. They seem to know how to do lots of things, but they don’t really know where to begin or what to do when presented with similar material in a novel setting.)

Truth #2: Another historically respected concept related to cognitive development is that while in the preoperational (ages 2-7) and concrete operational (ages 7-11) stages, children find it very easy to memorize large quantities of information. They do especially well in memorizing when they sing, chant, quote, and recite material. Nevertheless, some textbook publishers, influenced by trendy researchers (or visa versa), cast aspersions on the value of rote memorization, labeling it as meaningless, one-dimensional, boring—in short, a waste. In fact, this basic approach has stood the test of time, yielding it to be the opposite of “cutting edge,” and therefore of limited use in the textbook marketing arena.

Our organization, as a PreK through twelfth grade school, affords us the unique opportunity of seeing the long-term value of teaching students in the primary and elementary grades the basics from an approach that capitalizes on this well-known and time-honored truth related to cognitive development. Expecting our students to memorize and recite passages of scripture, leading them in chanting and singing the rules and function of words in sentences using the “Shurley grammar jingles,” practicing math facts nightly using old school paper flash cards, are just a few examples of how we “teach to the grain” of our students’ cognitive development, thus preparing them for what’s next—middle school and then the formal cognitive operations of deductive logic, metacognition, and other forms of abstract reasoning and thinking. In a word, if we are doing our job at the lower level, we graduate our students to middle school with a large wheelbarrow of building blocks. In the middle grades, they build structures using the blocks they obtained in the lower grades. Beyond middle school, the well-versed student is able to “move into” those structures built in middle school...using the blocks collected beginning in kindergarten.