Publisher (A) decides to create a new high school textbook from scratch. Idea lightbulb heats compost heap of similar textbooks (B), causing them to break down into sludge, which is simmered into master list of topics (C). Redundancies are boiled off (D) and philosophy (E) is mixed in. Elixir of topics drains into brain of editor, who starts worrying (F) about conservatives in Texas and liberal zealots in California. Editor transforms topics into outline (G), which flows to writers (H), causing them to begin scribbling. Editor begins worrying about finding name author (I). Text from writers is forced into mold of key curriculum guidelines (J). State frameworks for most states (K) are ignored. Tail (L) of key adoption state of Texas wags dog, which responds by taking textbook-size bites (M) from bales of compressed text. Name author (N) is signed to book. Book is reviewed (O). Too much evolution? Conservatives shoot it down. Not multiracial enough? Liberals shoot it down. Editor patches up holes and end-runs objections (P). Books finally make it to students (Q).
SOME YEARS AGO, I signed on as an editor at a major publisher of elementary and high school textbooks, filled with the idealistic belief that I’d be working with equally idealistic authors to create books that would excite teachers and fill young minds with Big Ideas.

Not so.

I got a hint of things to come when I overheard my boss lamenting, “The books are done and we still don’t have an author! I must sign someone today!”

Every time a friend with kids in school tells me textbooks are too generic, I think back to that moment. “Who writes these things?” people ask me. I have to tell them, without a hint of irony, “No one.” It’s symptomatic of the whole muddled mess that is the $4.3 billion textbook business.

Textbooks are a core part of the curriculum, as crucial to the teacher as a blueprint is to a carpenter, so one might assume they are conceived, researched, written, and published as unique contributions to advancing knowledge. In fact, most of these books fall far short of their important role in the educational scheme of things. They are processed into existence using the pulp of what already exists, rising like swamp things from the compost of the past. The mulch is turned and tended by many layers of editors who scrub it of anything possibly objectionable before it is fed into a government-run “adoption” system that provides mediocre material to students of all ages.
Welcome to the Machine

The first product I helped create was a basal language arts program. The word “basal” refers to a comprehensive package that includes students’ textbooks for a sequence of grades, plus associated teachers’ manuals and endless workbooks, tests, answer keys, transparencies, and other “ancillaries.” My company had dominated this market for years, but the brass felt that our flagship program was dated. They wanted something new, built from scratch.

Sounds like a mandate for innovation, right? It wasn’t. We got all the language arts textbooks in use and went through them carefully, jotting down every topic, subtopic, skill, and subskill we could find at each grade level. We compiled these into a master list, eliminated the redundancies, and came up with the core content of our new textbook. Or, as I like to call it, the “chum.”

But wait. If every publisher was going through this same process (and they were), how was ours to stand out? Time to stir in a philosophy. By philosophy, I mean a pedagogical idea. These conceptual enthusiasms surge through the education universe in waves. Textbook editors try to see the next one coming and shape their program to embody it.

The new ideas are born at universities and wash down to publishers through research papers and conferences. Textbook editors swarm to events like the five-day International Reading Association conference to pick up the buzz. They all run editors swarm to events like the five-day International Reading Association conference to pick up the buzz. They all run

Bon Appétit

With so much at stake, how did we get into this turgid mess? In the ’80s and ’90s, a feeding frenzy broke out among publishing houses as they all fought to swallow their competitors. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich bought Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Houghton Mifflin bought D.C. Heath and Co. McGraw-Hill bought Macmillan. Silver Burdett bought Ginn—or was it Ginn bought Silver? It doesn’t matter, because soon enough both were devoured by Prentice Hall, which in turn was gobbled up by Simon & Schuster.

Then, in the late ’90s, even bigger corporations began circling. Almost all the familiar textbook brands of yore vanished or ended up in the bellies of just four big sharks: Pearson, a British company; Vivendi Universal, a French firm; Reed Elsevier, a British-Dutch concern; and McGraw-Hill, the lone American-owned textbook conglomerate.

This concentration of money and power caused dramatic changes. In 1974, there were 22 major basal reading programs; now there are 5 or 6. As the number of basals (in all subject areas) shrank, so did editorial staffs. Many downsized editors floated off and started “development houses,” private firms that contract with educational publishers to deliver chunks of programs. They hire freelance managers to manage freelance editors to manage teams of freelance writers to produce text that skeleton crews of development-house executives sent on to publishing-house executives, who then pass it on to various committees for massaging.

A few years ago, I got an assignment from a development...
house to write a lesson on a particular reading skill. The freelance editor sent me the corresponding lessons from our client's three major competitors. “Here’s what the other companies are doing,” she told me. “Cover everything they do, only better.” I had to laugh: I had written (for other development houses) all three of the lessons I was competing with.

**The Cruelest Month**
In textbook publishing, April is the cruelest month. That’s when certain states announce which textbooks they’re adopting. When it comes to setting the agenda for textbook publishing, only the 22 states that have a formal adoption process count. The other 28 are irrelevant—even though they include populous giants like New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—because they allow all publishers to come in and market programs directly to local school districts.

Adoption states, by contrast, buy new textbooks on a regular cycle, usually every six years, and they allow only certain programs to be sold in their state. They draw up the list at the beginning of each cycle, and woe to publishers that fail to make that list, because for the next 72 months they will have zero sales in that state.

Among the adoption states, Texas, California, and Florida have unrivaled clout. Yes, size does matter. Together, these three have roughly 13 million students in K–12 public schools. The next 18 adoption states put together have about 12.7 million. Though the Big Three have different total numbers of students, they each spend about the same amount of money on textbooks. For the current school year, they budgeted more than $900 million for instructional materials, more than a quarter of all the money that will be spent on textbooks in the nation.

Obviously, publishers create products specifically for the adoptions in those three key states. They then sell the same product to everybody else, because basal programs are very expensive to produce—a K–8 reading program can cost as much as $60 million. Publishers hope to recoup the costs of a big program from the sudden gush of money in a big adoption state, then turn a profit on the subsequent trickle from the “open territories.” Those that fail to make the list in Texas, California, or Florida are stuck recouping costs for the next six years. Strapped for money to spend on projects for the next adoption period, they’re likely to fail again. As the cycle grows vicious, they turn into lunch meat.

**Don’t Mess with Texas**
The big three adoption states are not equal, however. In that elite trio, Texas rules. California has more students (more than 6 million versus just over 4 million in Texas), but Texas spends just as much money (approximately $42 billion) on its public schools. More important, Texas allocates a dedicated chunk of funds specifically for textbooks. That money can’t be used for anything else, and all of it must be spent in the adoption year. Furthermore, Texas has particular power when it comes to high school textbooks, since California adopts statewide only for textbooks from kindergarten through 8th grade, while the Lone Star State’s adoption process applies to textbooks from kindergarten through 12th grade.

If you’re creating a new textbook, therefore, you start by scrutinizing *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* (TEKS). This document is drawn up by a group of curriculum experts, teachers, and political insiders appointed by the 15 members of the Texas Board of Education, currently 5 Democrats and 10 Republicans, about half of whom have a background in education. TEKS describes what Texas wants and what the entire nation will therefore get.

Texas is truly the tail that wags the dog. There is, however, a tail that wags this mighty tail. Every adoption state allows private citizens to review textbooks and raise objections. Publishers must respond to these objections at open hearings.
In the late ‘60s a Texas couple, Mel and Norma Gabler, figured out how to use their state’s adoption hearings to put pressure on textbook publishers. The Gablers had no academic credentials or teaching background, but they knew what they wanted taught—phonics, sexual abstinence, free enterprise, creationism, and the primacy of Judeo-Christian values—and considered themselves in a battle against a “politically correct degradation of academics.” Expert organizers, the Gablers possessed a flair for constructing arguments out of the language of official curriculum guidelines. The Longview, Texas–based nonprofit corporation they founded 43 years ago, Educational Research Analysts, continues to review textbooks and lobby against liberal content in textbooks.

The Gablers no longer appear in person at adoption hearings, but through workshops, books, and how-to manuals, they trained a whole generation of conservative Christian activists to carry on their work.

Citizens also pressure textbook companies at California adoption hearings. These objections come mostly from such liberal organizations as Norman Lear’s People for the American Way, or from individual citizens who look at proposed textbooks when they are on display before adoption in 30 centers around the state.

What Are They Thinking?

A new book surveying foreign textbooks sheds light on how others see American history.


Who could have guessed that a book about textbooks would turn out to be a page-turner? And yet that’s exactly what authors Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward have produced with History Lessons: How Textbooks from Around the World Portray U.S. History. Lindaman and Ward, academics from Harvard University and Vincennes University in Indiana respectively, take many of the major historical events that occupy center stage in standard U.S. history textbooks and show how texts from other countries involved recount the same episodes. One nation’s glorious war for independence may be a pesky and pernicious insurrection to another people. A national leader may be oppressive or divinely guided, depending on one’s perspective (or on whose Gore was axed). And though it’s often said that history is written by the winners, losers and bit players write history, too.

In the introduction, the authors state the problem they seek to address:

Certain societies that could have more easily ignored the United States fifty years ago find themselves today dealing with U.S. corporations, fashion, food, entertainment, and U.S. foreign policy on a daily basis. And this is hardly a one-way street. However, there is one distinct advantage that these other countries have over the United States in this relationship: They are constantly exposed to the U.S., receiving a daily dose of information on the U.S. and Americans, studying English at school, and in some cases continuing their studies in this country. Americans, in sharp contrast, seem to know relatively little about other countries and cultures. This isolationist tendency is nowhere more apparent than within our own educational system.

Few are more aware of this isolationism than middle school and high school teachers, particularly those who teach history using standard texts that—not surprisingly—view the signal events of American history with a kind of national solipsism. Students in the States can therefore be forgiven if they think the entire world views these events in the same way.

To correct this tunnel vision (or, sometimes, light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel vision), Lindaman and Ward present a kind of Rashomon world, offering hundreds of accounts from foreign history textbooks. For example, the authors look at the Spanish-American War through the schoolbooks of Spain, Cuba, and the Philippines. A reader at least vaguely familiar with the U.S. high school textbook version—the conflict sparked by the sinking of the American battleship Maine, Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders, imperial Spain defeated, the oppressed Cubans and Filipinos liberated and grateful—will be surprised to see how each country regards the war a century later.

The Spanish textbook quoted, which might be expected to see Spain as an aggrieved party, in fact mostly dwells on the internal dissension and clumsy colonial governance that led to the war and defeat even though the U.S. “hardly had a professional army.” Significantly, the explosion that sank the Maine and precipitated America’s declaration of war is handled with equanimity: “In February of 1898 the North American cruiser Maine, anchored in the harbor of Havana, exploded. The cause of the explosion was never clearly explained and the North American authorities attributed it to Spanish sabotage.”

Perhaps the most surprising version of the Spanish-American War appears in textbooks from the Philippines, generally thought of in this country as a U.S. ally. The island nation’s standard history textbook presents a dark picture of American motives: “The Filipinos, who expected the Americans to champion their freedom, instead were betrayed and reluctantly fell into the hands of American imperialists.” On the sinking of the Maine, the book is angrily adamant: “Although the Maine had been blown up by American spies in order to provoke the war, the public was not informed of the truth.”

To better understand the world, we owe it to ourselves, and our students, to know that these varied national “truths” are out there. Dana Lindaman and Kyle Ward have compiled the textbook equivalent of the Gnostic Gospels, a book that every history teacher should be reading. —Owen Edwards
There’s no quick, simple fix for the blanding of American textbooks, but several steps are key to reform.

- Revamp our funding mechanisms to let teachers assemble their own curricula from numerous individual sources instead of forcing them to rely on single comprehensive packages from national textbook factories. We can’t have a different curricu-

Dull? No, because these cores would not be the actual instructional material students would use. They would be analogous to operating systems in the world of software. If there are only a few of these and they’re pretty similar, it’s OK. Local districts and classroom teachers would receive funds enabling them to assemble their own constellations of lessons and supporting materials around the core texts, purchased not from a few behemoths but from hundreds of smaller publishing houses such as those that currently supply the supplementary-textbook industry.

- Just as software developers create applications for particular operating systems, textbook developers should develop materials that plug into the core texts. Small companies and even individuals who see a niche could produce a module to fill it. None would need to develop materials that plug into the core texts. Small companies and even individuals who see a niche could produce a module to fill it. None would need hundreds of smaller publishing houses such as those that currently supply the supplementary-textbook industry.

Survivors know how to censor themselves.

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