

# 7

## SELECTION OF TEXTBOOKS OR READINGS FOR YOUR COURSE

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In the design and implementation of teaching for a college course, it is important to consider which textbook or readings to use. Course design experts (Fink, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) emphasize that the textbook should not drive the course but should instead be used to achieve course goals. But what factors influence a text's compatibility with course goals? One cannot assume that newer texts necessarily reflect cognitive learning principles. Indeed, there is little published evidence that fundamental cognitive psychology principles are routinely embedded as part of textbook design (Matlin, 2002; but see Winne & Nesbit, 2010, for a recent review). Rather, changes in textbooks tend to reflect developments in the subject field. For example, Weiten and Wight (1992) provided an overview of the history of publishing introductory psychology textbooks, suggesting that content changes in textbooks are due to (a) research progress in psychology, (b) new pedagogical techniques and changing student demographics, (c) societal and cultural change, and (d) publishing industry influences.

In this chapter, I first summarize general advice from other authors about textbook selection. Next, I summarize the research on factors affecting textbook selection. Finally, I discuss the possibility of using course readings.

## GENERAL ADVICE FROM OTHER AUTHORS ABOUT TEXTBOOK SELECTION

In compendia offering broad teaching advice, the topic of textbook selection is frequently mentioned (Christopher, 2006; Davis, 1993; Lucas & Bernstein, 2005; McKeachie, 2002; Robinson, 1994). McKeachie (2002) suggested a procedure in which students choose a single textbook for the course from a short list of two or three textbooks or suggest that different books be made available at the bookstore for the same course. Such involvement might encourage students to feel empowered and share ownership in the textbook selection process. Although databases do exist that systematically review difficulty level, length, chapter topics and organization, pedagogical aids, and core vocabulary variables of introductory psychology textbooks (e.g., Griggs, 2006), there is not much advice offered to psychology instructors as to how to apply these criteria in the actual evaluation and selection of textbooks.

Textbook selection is a topic not limited to psychology instruction, and advice about textbook selection practices is available from other disciplines. Dowie (1981) and Hartley and Ross (1985) provided structured checklists that organize singular evaluative items into familiar rubrics (e.g., range of subject, pedagogical features). Bartlett and Morgan (1991) developed a specialized checklist designed to help instructors of multiple sections of the same course make textbook decisions. Insightful advice about textbook publishing is available from authors of psychology textbooks (Matlin, 1997; Matthews & Davis, 1999; Myers, 2007).

## RESEARCH ABOUT TEXTBOOK SELECTION VARIABLES

The ubiquitous textbook is a topic of interest to researchers in many fields. As I reviewed this broad literature, four themes emerged: research about (a) physical textbook features (e.g., page length), (b) objective measures (e.g., frequency counts of books published in a content area), (c) content analyses of textbooks based on core terms, and (d) content analyses based on other elements (e.g., pedagogical aids). Each of these areas is briefly reviewed here.

### **Physical Characteristics**

Studies that examine the physical (i.e., static, fixed) characteristics of textbooks can be divided into three types: (a) comparison studies that address only objective features; (b) content analysis studies that examine

and identify the core terms within a specialty area; and (c) content analysis studies that are based on content other than core terms, such as main ideas or major theories. If an instructor wanted to base his or her textbook selection in part on objective criteria, the resources provided by the following types of studies can be invaluable.

### **Objective Features**

There are at least two different approaches to the examination of objective features. A discipline-wide approach could be used to examine the sheer number of textbooks available or the number of new books per year published in specialty areas within a discipline (Chatman & Goetz, 1985). The benefit of this approach is that trends can be tracked over time. Most research in this genre is limited to a subspecialty or a particular course within a discipline. For example, Christopher, Griggs, and Hagans (2000) completed an analysis of the physical characteristics of 14 social psychology textbooks and 17 abnormal psychology textbooks; Marek and Griggs (2001) completed a similar physical characteristics analysis for 17 cognitive psychology textbooks.

Numerous sources are available that summarize the characteristics of the introductory psychology textbook (Griggs, Jackson, Christopher, & Marek, 1999; Griggs, Jackson, & Napolitano, 1994; Griggs & Koenig, 2001). Others have used physical characteristics for objective analysis but subsequently included student or faculty attitude/opinion surveys—those studies are presented later. Examination of physical characteristics alone yields helpful information when selecting a textbook, such as the feature set of the textbook. Another approach within the domain of objective features analysis involves the identification of core concepts.

### **Content Analyses Based on Core Terms**

A recurring theme in the teaching of psychology literature has been the content analysis of core items from introductory psychology textbooks (Griggs, Bujak-Johnson, & Proctor, 2004; Landrum, 1993; Quereshi, 1993; Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2000). With regard to a core terminology to use for textbook selection, the outcomes may be troubling. Depending on the methodology used in the previously cited core content studies, the core number of items in introductory psychology textbooks ranges from three concepts to 126 concepts.

Zechmeister and Zechmeister (2000) reported that “the lack of convergent validity is obvious and troubling” (p. 9), or with perhaps a more positive interpretation, “the results of our studies and those of others suggest that if psychology has a common language, there are many dialects” (p. 10). In some

respects, the lack of a common core in introductory psychology may also reflect the fragmentation believed to exist in psychology today (Dunn et al., 2010).

### **Content Analyses Based on Content Other Than Core Terms**

Microlevel content analysis approaches are characterized as examining variables at the elemental level, such as objective tallies of the occurrence of features (e.g., pedagogical aids) or the occurrence of basic ideas (e.g., core terms). Some researchers have taken a more macrolevel approach as a method of textbook comparison and selection. For instance, Griggs and Marek (2001) and Griggs, Jackson, Marek, and Christopher (1998) compared introductory psychology textbooks by examining critical-thinking sections and the citations used. Goldstein, Siegel, and Seaman (2009) reviewed how disability-related topics were presented in 24 introductory psychology textbooks. Other types of content analyses used to compare textbooks have included an analysis of the most frequently cited books (Griggs, Proctor, & Cook, 2004), of the most frequently cited journal articles and authors (Gorenflo & McConnell, 1991), and of scientific thinking and statistical thinking sections of textbooks (Griggs et al., 1998). As an instructor, if you wish to focus on a particular aspect of the typical textbook—such as a book that focuses on critical thinking—a macrolevel approach as described here could be useful.

## **INSTRUCTOR AND STUDENT VARIABLES**

Logically, the participants in formal research studies about textbooks have been faculty members and students. Research with faculty members centers on measuring their opinions about textbooks, and student-based research expands beyond opinions only to include studies about student use of textbooks and how textbooks may influence course performance. Both of these research areas are briefly reviewed here.

### **Research Based on Faculty Opinion**

Research that is based on faculty opinion falls into two categories: (a) journal article authors completing an analysis of textbooks, and (b) journal article authors surveying other faculty members and then analyzing quantitative data. In psychology, these types of studies have been published by Altman, Ericksen, and Pena-Shaff (2006); Landrum and Hormel (2002); Weiten (1988); and Yonker, Cummins-Sebree, Marshall, and Zai (2007). The approaches used tend to mirror the approach used in the analysis of the physical characteristics of a textbook. That is, some researchers examine

broad content-based categories such as theories, theoretical approaches, and discipline-based orientations, and other researchers focus on the importance of certain textbook features. In an analysis of selection criteria regarding psychology textbooks, Landrum and Hormel (2002) reported that the top five criteria for faculty (with 1 = *most important*) were as follows: (a) accuracy, (b) readability/writing quality, (c) examples, (d) currency of research, and (e) research base; they also found that the faculty textbook selection criteria do not map perfectly onto the faculty perceptions of what helps students learn responses. For example, faculty members highly rated “currency of research” as important for textbook selection, but moderately rated “currency of research” for importance to student learning. Additionally, for some dimensions, instructor experience influences selection criteria. For instance, more experienced instructors place more importance on diagrams and figures, and less experienced instructors place more importance on the availability of ancillary materials that accompany the textbook.

### **Research Based on Student Opinion, Use, and Performance Outcomes**

Research is now emerging about how students use textbooks and how textbook use may influence student performance (Gurung, 2004, 2005; Gurung, Weidert, & Jeske, 2010). This type of research is important to those instructors who would prefer to base textbook selection on empirical data from student-learning outcomes. Three lines of research emerge: (a) how students use the textbook, (b) how textbook features affect student opinion and student course performance, and (c) the use of student opinions as part of the actual textbook selection process.

Various methodologies have been developed to empirically assess the readability of textbook passages, and textbook readability is a key selection variable by instructors. For instance, Gillen (1973) included a direct comparison of Flesch readability and human interest scores of 34 introductory psychology textbooks and found a strong correlation (+0.60) between readability and human interest scores. Such measures may be of interest to faculty members making textbook selections. Using a different student-based approach, Stang (1975) developed an assessment instrument for the evaluation of 28 social psychology textbooks, and Fernald (1989) reported that when students studied textbook material they preferred the narrative mode (storytelling) versus the traditional format when given the choice. For the final exam, mean scores were higher for the narrative approach, and information from the narrative condition was recalled more often in follow-up testing. Nevid and Carmony (2002) varied the presentation of textbook chapter material in either the traditional format and layout or a more compartmentalized modular format with individual headings used for organizational purposes. Students who indicated

a preference for the modular format scored better on quiz-type questions in the modular format compared with students with no preference. These studies not only illustrate the utility of research with students but also point to the complexity of textbook selection—it is unlikely that one uniform textbook selection rubric can best suit all students' needs in all courses and situations.

Many researchers have taken the approach of asking students about various pedagogical aids and the extent to which students believe that textbook features positively or negatively impact textbook use. Weiten, Guadagno, and Beck (1996) asked students about their familiarity, their probability of use, and the overall value of 13 pedagogical aids. Students valued boldfaced terms, chapter summaries, and running glossaries the most. Weiten, Deguara, Rehmke, and Sewell (1999) replicated and extended these findings with high school, community college, and university students. Across the 15 possible pedagogical aids, boldfaced terms, running or chapter glossaries, chapter summaries, and self-tests were most valued, regardless of institutional type. In a variation of this approach, Marek, Griggs, and Christopher (1999) asked first-semester and senior-year psychology students to rate 15 pedagogical aids on familiarity, likelihood of use, and value but also conducted an analysis of 37 introductory psychology textbooks at the same time to examine the relationship between student opinion and prevalence of the feature in textbooks. Marek et al. (1999) formed two conclusions: (a) students tend to highly value pedagogical aids that are most closely associated with exam preparation, such as boldfaced type and glossaries; and (b) students tend to place lesser value on pedagogical aids designed to instill deeper learning, such as chapter outlines or discussion questions. How students interact with their textbooks and how students learn and retain information is therefore not connected (Marek et al., 1999). Weiten et al. (1996) clearly identified this disconnect when they said that “it is time to begin basic research to determine whether specific textbook pedagogical aids actually facilitate student learning” (p. 106).

Gurung directly examined the relationship between pedagogical aids and student performance (see Gurung & Daniel, 2005, for a summary). For example, Gurung (2003) asked students about the frequency of use of pedagogical aids and their perceived helpfulness, but when these student ratings were compared with exam scores, the only significant result was that there was a negative correlation ( $-0.20$ ) between the ratings of helpfulness of key terms and exam performance. Thus, the overreliance on a particular pedagogical aid such as key terms may lead to detrimental influence on exam performance. Speculatively, it could be that relying on a shortcut such as studying the key terms does not lead to deeper learning. For those selecting textbooks, pedagogical aids would be assumed to enhance learning. However, these findings indicate that students may not choose to use pedagogical aids as originally intended. Gurung (2004) reported that more-able students (determined by ACT scores

and high school GPA) use key terms, practice questions, and summaries less often than less-able students. In textbook selection, the specific student population should be considered when evaluating different pedagogical features. Additionally, students may require instruction on how to appropriately use pedagogical aids to facilitate deeper learning and retention. Textbook selection with particular features may necessitate an “orientation to studying” from the instructor to maximize a textbook’s effectiveness.

The research previously described is invaluable in gaining an understanding of the interplay between students, textbooks, and learning. Other studies have focused more on the selection component of textbook selection than on the content itself. For example, Yonker et al. (2007) described a process for combining the opinions of instructors and students for textbook selection, and Lowry and Moser (1995) shared a multistep selection approach that was successfully used by a textbook selection committee. Regarding selection, student judgments about learning from textbooks are accurate reflections of actual learnability (Britton, Van Dusen, Gulgoz, Glynn, & Sharp, 1991) and text quality (Durwin & Sherman, 2008).

A departmental process involving students in selecting an introductory psychology textbook with successful implementation was developed by Altman et al. (2006). On the basis of faculty opinion, these researchers developed five criteria for textbook selection: content, pedagogy, student ancillaries, instructor ancillaries, and publisher’s representative supportiveness. Assembling over 40 introductory psychology textbooks, faculty members each rated each textbook on the five criteria; on the basis of overall scores, the textbooks being considered for adoption were reduced to 10. Further examination of the ancillaries reduced the 10 textbooks under consideration to four. Next, one faculty member taught four sections of an introductory psychology course, with a different book being used by each section; the syllabi, lectures, class demonstrations, and exams were all identical. In fact, publishers loaned books and ancillary materials to all students so that there would be no differential costs to students, depending on their particular textbook. Average test grades and final course grades were nearly identical across the four sections; however, two sections of the course required greater assistance from the instructor because the textbooks used had graphical and pedagogical features that were more distracting than helpful. In the end, the department adopted both of the books deemed superior by students—“one book outstanding for students who were self-identified or identified by the instructor as text-oriented learners, whereas the other seemed more appropriate for learners with symbolic thinking styles” (p. 229). Given the complexity of textbook choices and the various learning preferences of students, this rigorous vetting process followed by the selection of multiple textbooks appears to be an insightful approach for textbook selection (see also McKeachie, 2002).

## RESEARCH ON NONTEXTBOOK READINGS

What if the purposeful decision is made not to use a textbook? The published literature on the use of readings is sparse in comparison with the work available on textbook selection. It is likely that there is no perfect textbook for any situation (Swales, 2009), which may lead some to consider readings. Hobson (2004) suggested that readings may be the superior choice when (a) there is a high amount of overlap between in-class lecture and the textbook, and the textbook may therefore be redundant; (b) no existing textbook is a good fit for the course; or (c) no textbook is deemed essential, but recommended readings can be placed on library reserve. Johnson and Carton (2006) pointedly suggested the following reasons for not using the full-length textbook: (a) the textbook incurs heavy reading demands; (b) reading deeply from textbooks may be a challenge; and (c) the amount of time to read full-length chapters is not conducive to student study habits, which may lead to delayed studying or cramming.

As an instructor, if the previously mentioned concerns are motivation to select a set of readings rather than use a textbook, then by what criteria should readings be selected? Much of the same criteria identified with textbooks also apply to readings. Accuracy, currency of content, difficulty level, cost, size, and format and layout are considerations that Davis (1993) recommended. A number of different approaches are available to satisfy these criteria. Open source and freely available online resources provide a wealth of resources for instructors and students (Buczynski, 2007). A classic set of readings can be used as the primary source material for an introductory psychology course (Griggs & Jackson, 2007). Smaller paperback books can be used as a central organizing theme for the introductory course, typically centering on application of research (Duntley, Shaffer, & Merrens, 2008; Gernsbacher, Pew, Hough, & Pomerantz, 2011; Hock, 2009) or debunking myths and misperceptions about psychology (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2010; Stanovich, 2010). The selection of any materials for the introductory course, whether it be via textbook selection or a collection of readings, should involve a premeditated course design process in which student characteristics and learning goals are carefully weighed by the instructor.

## CONCLUSION

Depending on your experience, preferences emerge—more experienced faculty tend to want more diagrams and figures, whereas less experienced faculty rely more on the ancillary package available. Textbook selection must



## EXHIBIT 7.1 Evidence-Based Recommendations

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- Although book chapters and teaching compendia may offer sage advice, look for guidelines that are based on recommendations from empirical articles and do not solely rely on author opinion and/or expertise. Journal articles may be more empirical and timely than book chapters.
  - Beware of marketing materials from publishers about the effectiveness of textbooks—look for evidence-based design of textbooks and textbook features.
  - Think about the role of the textbook before you decide whether to base your textbook selection on objective physical features. Objective physical features may be easy to compare among different books, but there is little research that suggests that a book with fewer pages, more tables, or psychodynamic key terms will result in improved student learning.
  - Determine whether faculty opinions or student opinions are more valuable to you as an aid in textbook selection. Students tend to prefer textbooks with pedagogical aids that assist in exam preparation; faculty members tend to prefer textbooks with the most current research.
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be made with local context in mind, as well as the plan for teaching the course and how the textbook will be used in the overall course design. However, solid evidence-based recommendations here are difficult because in the literature some outcomes may be laboratory based, nearly all studies are single institution efforts, and pedagogy studies are correlational at best. Exhibit 7.1 provides recommendations for selecting a textbook or reading for a class. Exhibit 7.2 lists some key areas for future research. As educators better understand student learning and assess learning outcomes accurately, combining preexisting knowledge about effective pedagogy with an empirical scholarship of teaching and learning approach should yield educational strategies that enhance understanding of how students learn and retain information from textbooks and readings.

## EXHIBIT 7.2 Questions for Future Research

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- What decision-making rubrics do faculty follow to select the textbook?
  - Does selection methodology affect the effectiveness of course materials?
  - How do textbook pedagogy and student use of the textbook affect actual student performance on tests/quizzes on which the grade “counts”? The translation from laboratory to classroom may not be seamless.
  - How does the course material impact student performance?
  - How does student performance with readings differ from student performance with a textbook?
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