Ron Christiansen

This article questions our reliance on textbooks through my own struggles to come to terms with my ambiguous, sometimes frustrating, relationship with textbooks.

I’m quitting cold turkey. Instead of watching MASH reruns over the Christmas break, I buy ten different memoirs and scour the pages of the New Yorker as I search for examples to replace my old textbook readings. I feel rejuvenated, getting up out of bed to jot notes to myself about my revamped course—everything is in flux, and it feels damn good. Even so it is difficult to leave the well-rutted contours of my pedagogical past.

I learned the basics of teaching college writing as an adjunct using The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, one of those very fat and expensive rhetorics that contains a little bit of everything including the kitchen sink. But now—almost a decade of full-time teaching under my belt—I’m often startled by the bloated, overpriced textbook my students bring to class: how did this get in here? Oh yeah, I require students to buy it. A hard habit to break.

It’s difficult because I’ve spent many an evening cozied up with textbooks: writing dozens of detailed reviews, participating in several pilots, developing new curriculum, and introducing adjunct faculty to a new book. This work has been intellectually engaging and challenging. And, on a programmatic level, it’s necessary given the high percentage of adjunct-taught courses. Yet on a personal level I find myself resenting the textbook in my classroom. It grates on me as I find my prep time centered on reviewing the canned chapters and dull examples. How is it possible that these vibrant textbook authors created such drivel?

Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson of Miami University recounts her utter surprise at the heavy editing of the conversational tone in a textbook she was writing: “Our language of varied contexts and possibilities had been reduced to universalizing admonitions. We fought back hard, bargaining sentence by sentence and page by page to reinstate or entirely rewrite passages. Nevertheless, by the time the book came out, the text’s voice had been transmuted into a strange hybrid, partly the one we had imagined and partly a corporate voice” (320). Reading such accounts of writing a textbook infuriates me: the textbook in my class probably was quite
engaging, but because of marketing pressures much life had been sucked out of it. These same pressures also create a rigid overall structure that shapes the entire course. Too often I have avoided significant curricular changes, even when I saw them as beneficial to students, because I realized it would lead me away from the textbook. And how could I justify using the textbook less when students were dropping eighty bucks on it? I couldn’t.

I was ready to take the leap.

Seeing the wide-open white pages on my syllabus and schedule, not filled or structured by a textbook, I realize I have an opportunity to reconsider my pedagogical landscape. Quickly I recognize how many ideas I’ve meant to implement over the years, but never fully implemented because I had to cover the textbook: sharing with students my favorite writing examples, having students write during class, using student writing to illustrate rhetorical principles, and inviting students to find and evaluate materials for use in the course. Textbooks are merely tools, tools I’m afraid I have sometimes given too much power. As Robert J. Connors argues in “Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline,” we must keep “training teachers to stand by themselves . . . re-invent[ing] textbooks in the image of their best nature—as our tools, not crutches we depend upon for all support. Texts can be powerful servants, but only our own pride in and knowledge of our subject will keep them from turning on us and becoming, as they have in the past, oppressive masters” (192).

Connors’s article starts with a 1933 (yes, almost eighty years ago) quote from Porter Perrin, an early writing researcher, who proclaims, “The way out does not lie in tools but in sheer teaching.” A phrase that haunts me: “the way out.” It seems as teachers we are often trying to find a way out: a way out from student lack of engagement, a way out from students who do not read, a way out from our own boredom in explaining a concept we have covered hundreds of times, a way out from the ever complicated interrelationship between student and teacher. We do not want an ultimate solution, a pedagogical suicide, but we innocently crave relief from the messy business of teaching: to know that an approach will fully engage and teach students a particular concept. And so we are susceptible to believe the choirs of voices, often now distributed via “new” textbooks, bringing us unique approaches and tools that will finally bring us relief. And yet long before the behemoth textbook apparatus we have today, Perrin expressed a keen insight: these tools will never remove from us the burden of “sheer teaching.” I assume tools or technologies will always be a part of the teaching process, but my confidence in them is waning; certainly they can’t bring us answers to daunting questions about how to organize student learning that come to us at 11:38 p.m. as we lie in bed contemplating the next day of teaching.

I’m walking down the familiar Business Building hallway; it’s the first day of class. First days make me feel scattered because I do not have a routine yet. I double-check to see that I have everything: one manila folder containing a class roll, thirty syllabi, one red and one black dry eraser, one laptop. Do I have everything? I wonder. My
mind drifts to that infamous Simpsons’ episode when Lisa steals the teachers’ editions of the class textbooks. Principal Skinner gives the bad news to the teachers: “The unthinkable has happened. Some sick, twisted individual has stolen every teacher’s edition in this school.” The humorous panic and chaos that ensue in the episode now unsettles me as walk textbookless to class. Even though something seems amiss, I think I can jump out of the ruts and stand on my own.

Works Cited


Ron Christiansen teaches composition courses without a textbook at Salt Lake Community College in Utah.

Call for Proposals: 2012 CEL Convention

The conference planning committee for the 2012 CEL Convention welcomes proposals that address the conference theme, *Writing as Leadership: Fostering a Culture of Writing and Reflective Practice.* We invite you to share your story or to model effective leadership and writing practices in a workshop.

The Conference on English Leadership encourages interactive, participatory presentations. As a nonprofit organization of educators, we unfortunately are not able to give a stipend or expenses for this appearance. Please see www.ncte.org/cel for the conference proposal form, which carries a May 1st deadline, and additional information. We look forward to your joining us in Las Vegas, November 18–20, 2012.