

A Classroom Without Books Is Not Progress

As schools abandon textbooks for piecemeal and digital alternatives, teaching and learning suffer

BY ROBERT C. THORNETT



BOB DAEMRICH / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

IT IS AMAZING HOW EASY the Internet has made it to get books. The volumes emperors and scholars once scoured the earth to obtain are today available at the click of a button—and sometimes delivered to your doorstep the same day.

Yet in this book-abundant moment, it is not unusual to see stacks of textbooks sitting uncracked throughout a school. Over my two decades as a teacher, I have witnessed numerous sets of 40 or more excellent textbooks go untouched all year. They sit on classroom shelves or molder in student lockers while teachers dispense PowerPoints, worksheets, notes, or lectures. Some schools do not bother buying books at all—not just schools with limited resources, but private schools charging \$50,000 a year in tuition. “We like to give teachers

freedom,” school administrators have told me. Which freedom is expressed by withholding resources? Avoiding textbooks too often results in avoiding accountability, permitting unsound teaching ideologies, or being pennywise and pound foolish.

Why stake the education of children on the assumption that makeshift materials will be an adequate substitute for a textbook assembled by a team of experts?

“A room without books is like a body without a soul,” said Cicero. Yet we are sending many students into classrooms without books and hoping they still learn.

The Post-Book Classroom

Many school districts are touting their abandonment of textbooks

as progress. Consider this Delaware headline: “Garnet Valley High School Leads the Way in Ditching Textbooks for Digital Learning.” The district highlights the money it

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will save. Absent is any mention of the quality of whatever materials will replace textbooks, except to say they're digital and open source. The tacit assumption is that they are a legitimate substitute.

However, schools often replace textbooks with disparate fragments of learning materials. Some are homemade lesson plans created by teachers. Some are found online, deposited in a folder for teachers to cobble together into something approximating a cohesive course. Thousands of teachers unsatisfied with such resources spend hundreds or even thousands of dollars of their own money on personal textbooks and other materials to copy. There is a cost to ditching textbooks, and teachers often absorb it.

Everything found in a good textbook—narratives, diagrams, art, maps, primary documents, homework questions—is carefully planned and organized by experienced authors and professional editors. Why stake the education of children on the assumption that scattershot, makeshift materials will be an adequate substitute for a textbook assembled by a team of experts?

Ditching the Roadmap

Abandoning textbooks can also throw a school's curriculum into a tailspin. Textbooks have long been de facto guides to mandatory curricula, as Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers point out in the *Education Week* article "No Textbooks: A New Responsibility for Teachers and Leaders." Sure, school systems publish curriculum outlines, but the hard part is creating teaching materials. Teachers—and students—have relied on the fact that state-approved textbooks are tailored to cover the state learning standards. Follow the textbook, and you can be sure you're following the curriculum.

Berkowicz and Myers warn that the disappearance of textbooks means the loss of curricular roadmaps. The "move away from print texts is a move away from an old 'accountability' system [which] gave teachers, students, leaders, and parents a method for noting progress through [the] curriculum," they say. "Teachers designed tests according to pages or chapters covered. Parents expected children to study that content and be ready. Backpacks were full of these texts." Removing textbooks can force teachers to redesign their assessments without clear targets, hoping they are hitting benchmarks but never entirely sure.

A crucial but often overlooked characteristic of textbooks is that they are designed with input from many different stakeholders. Textbook substitutes usually are not. The content of textbooks is often a matter of fierce debate between parents, state and local school systems, and even politicians. But it is through the friction of this semi-democratic process that

publishers are held accountable. By contrast, the PowerPoint presentation Bob made and dropped into the departmental folder is vetted by no one before teachers use it in their classes. Textbook publishers must deliver quality content to compete in the free market; with textbook substitutes, competition and quality control are virtually nonexistent.

The Downsides of E-Books

Some publishers have shifted to e-books as a cost-effective way to deliver content. E-books eliminate printing and shipping costs, and they have a more global reach than printed textbooks, which can be hard to supply in some markets. But the push for textbooks in a digital format is also driven by profit. E-books require buying new licenses each year, compelling customers to purchase access to online

portals hosted by publishers.

E-books certainly have their advantages. They are usually cheaper and more portable. They allow text searches and embedded links to source material. Indeed, e-books have often bailed me out as a teacher when schools did not provide a physical textbook, turning what would have been a challenging year of scraping materials together into smooth sailing.

But e-books have major downsides. A 2018 study in *Educational Research Review* found screens have a "detrimental effect" on reading comprehension that "increases over time." And e-books force screen-saturated students to spend even more hours in front of devices. While scientists advise turning off screens two to three hours before bed, that is exactly when many students do homework. Instead of pushing kids further into the digital world, there are compelling reasons to guide them back into a more tangible existence.

"Much of the social history of the Western world over the past three decades has involved replacing what worked with what sounded good," said Thomas Sowell. His observation aptly describes what has been happening in schools that abandon physical textbooks and go all-in on digital. Their zeal is often motivated by saving money or appearing "innovative," failing to see that using textbooks actually works.

Parents can demand that schools use textbooks. They should know which books are available in their child's school and whether classes are using them. Parents' nights or school open houses are a good opportunity for them to look around for books not being used and ask why not. If a fundamental purpose of schools is to instill in students a love of reading, putting textbooks back in their hands is a step in the right direction.

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