

# TEXTBOOKS AS SCHOLARSHIP?

By Terry Sykes

*This article is the conclusion to an independent study with TAA member Susan Day at Illinois State University. Terry Sykes, a senior at the institution, is an English major and economics minor. He plans on developing a career within the publishing industry after graduation. Specifically, he would like to develop literature textbooks that offer a greater range of authors and ideas.*

Perhaps one of the more controversial issues in regard to the publication of textbooks by university professors is whether or not these texts should be used in determining a faculty member's tenure and salary. And, if these texts are to be used, how important should these publications be considered, relative to the scholarly journal articles for which faculty members are more widely known in academic circles?

A recent survey of over two hundred faculty members at Illinois State University revealed that among the academic sector of the administration, a very large disagreement exists in regard to the way textbooks should be judged as scholarship. In order to assure a proper cross-section of the university, surveys were distributed to several departments in different fields, including the departments of English, Mathematics, Chemistry, Finance & Law, Economics, Art, Biological Sciences, and Accounting.

Professors were asked to assign numerical responses to questions regarding their personal evaluation of scholarly journal articles and textbooks. Professors were also given the chance to give written responses in regard to any distinctions they made among different types of textbooks.

In addition, interviews were conducted with several professors who had written and published textbooks. The number of textbooks published by each professor ranged from one to fourteen.

The most frequently made comment concerning the acceptance of textbooks as scholarship was that the textbook must illustrate a new approach to the subject or present

new ideas and research--not just present the same material in a different order. Also, textbooks containing advanced material were generally viewed as more important than those for more general courses and pre-college level studies.

For example, Stephen Friedberg, professor of mathematics, commented that most mathematicians would not consider a calculus textbook truly scholarly because this type of book is not much different from its predecessors. Friedberg also suggested some criteria for scholarly textbooks, including:

1.) the adoption of the text by schools other than that of the author, 2.) use of others' proven scholarly work in a text, and 3.) the presentation of something new at a college or university level.

Meeting these criteria is much more important to Friedberg than the money he makes from his texts (which he claims isn't very much, averaging about \$1/hour for the time spent preparing them). Friedberg considers at least one of his books, *Linear Algebra*, very successful because it has been adopted by Harvard, UCLA, and several Canadian schools--not because of any monetary success.

William Scott, professor of finance and law, said that the belief that journal articles are more scholarly than textbooks definitely exists in the university setting. However, Scott defends the publication of textbooks by noting that often journal articles have too narrow a focus and don't allow a great expansion of knowledge. Writing a textbook, though, enables the professor ample room to develop much broader insight and a wider range of knowledge. Textbooks also help profes-

sors to sharpen their writing and communication skills, and, as a result, make them better teachers.

John Cragan, professor of communication, commented that although journal articles are important, the dissemination of that information to make it readily available to the student population is also very important. This is where textbooks become critical. A major reason he decided to write a textbook is that after teaching for many years (he has been a faculty member for over 25 years) he has developed his own ideas as to how a class should be taught. And writing a textbook that *teaches* is very crucial.

Neil Skaggs, associate professor of economics, believes that journal articles are normally considered more respectable than textbooks; but he also believes that a large percentage of journal articles printed today are trivial and not significant. Susan Day, who has written or co-authored 14 textbooks, also agrees with Skaggs in regard to the trivial nature of many journal articles. She also claims that she would rate many textbooks as more scholarly than journal articles for this reason.

Numerical results of the surveys varied widely, both within departments, as well as among different departments. As expected, the sciences' perception of textbooks as scholarly was much lower than their perception of journal articles. English, economics and accounting all placed greater value on journal articles, but with less emphasis than did the sciences. Finance and Law, mathematics, and art departments all valued journal articles and textbooks as more equally important, but still journal articles were normally valued higher.

More interesting was the fact that in the biological sciences department, for example, ten percent of faculty members responding to the survey rated journal articles and textbooks as approximately equal in scholarship. Conversely, in the English department, over fifty percent of responding faculty mem-

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6 bers rated the two forms of publications approximately equal. These responses were typical of the differing attitudes present among different departments. But as one professor pointed out, different departments consider different types of research more important than others.

#### The Profit Factor

More controversial was the issue of whether or not the profit factor should be considered when assigning scholarship to a textbook. Some professors did mention money in this regard; others simply implied it. In both cases, however, there are people on each side of the issue.

According to one accounting professor at ISU, "If a textbook is essentially a commercial undertaking, I don't attach as much significance to it as one which has a scholarly focus." Determining a professor's primary motive for publishing a textbook, however, is not always as easy as determining why he or she publishes scholarly journal articles. Scholarly journal articles are often done for non-profit, educational reasons. Conversely, textbooks often involve royalties for their authors, sometimes amounting to quite a bit of money.

Because of the possibility of the author receiving royalties, many textbook authors have claimed that their textbooks, which to them represent many, many hours of hard work and research, are often regarded as inferior to other forms of publication. Richard C. Larock, professor of Chemistry at Iowa State University, charged in a recent issue of *TAA Report* that he had himself been the object of this type of discrimination. In defending the publication of his textbook, Larock explains that "distinguished academic researchers are never asked to forego salary increases, because they may receive lecture honoraria, consulting fees or prizes. So why should book authors be asked to do that, because they may receive royalties?" (1)

John C. Shields, author of an anthology entitled *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, pub-

lished his book with a university press. The book has earned Shields considerable recognition in scholarly fields. However, Shields believes that he would not have received this degree of recognition had the book been written for profit.

All of the professors interviewed who had written a textbook themselves believed that profit shouldn't matter when applying scholarship to a textbook. One important factor that several of the professors pointed out was that many of them wrote advanced level textbooks. And because of their texts' advanced level, the target audience for their texts were naturally smaller, and as a result the professors didn't expect to make a lot of money on their books.

#### Is Publication Necessary?

There were also differences in the perceptions of a textbook's value among different departments. One professor of Biological Sciences commented that "In the field of biology, original research papers are considered to be the norm for scholarly productivity and publication of textbooks carries much less weight. But this may not be the case in other departments, such as the humanities." However, the professor went on to say that "I have no problem accepting a well-written textbook as evidence of scholarly work."

Conversely, another professor in the same department made the bold comment that "Nobody seeking tenure can possibly have the time to write a textbook!" Obviously, even within departments there is neither a consensus of opinion nor an understanding of how much work the writing of a textbook actually entails.

The question of the amount of importance that should be placed on a professor's publication record is indeed a very prominent question at universities all around the country. However, a few professors inquired as to why my surveys had not asked about teaching ability, attempting to diminish the emphasis I had placed on publishing in regard to professors' tenure and salary increases. A Finance and

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Law professor went so far as to say that "If this is to be the premiere undergrad teaching institution as stated in the official mission, then measuring publications is measuring the shadows rather than the real thing," that is, teaching ability.

Indeed, productive teaching ability is definitely important when considering tenuring faculty members. This fact has probably never been debated. However, in all departments of a university tenuring decisions do not rely on teaching alone. According to many faculty members, considerations of a professor's publications must be included in these decisions to ensure productive scholarly activity by the professors. George Kidder III, chairperson of the Biological Sciences department at ISU, replied that "What is very important for one person or in one field may be less so for another person or field. What I do not believe can be tolerated is tenuring persons without demonstration of both scholarly activity and teaching. At present, too many at ISU would omit the former."

The problem arises, however, when attempting to determine what should count as scholarly activity. Textbooks to some represent exactly what the definition of scholarship entails: accredited research for the purpose of advancement in one's field. To others, unfortunately, textbooks do not.

(1) Larock, Richard C. "Frustrations of a University Book Author." *TAA Report*, April 1991.