Teaching the Textbook: 
Teacher/Text Authority and the 
Problem of Interpretation

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A great deal has been written and said about reader/writer/text relations, and about the locus of authority over text interpretation. But this body of work, which emerges primarily from the field of literary criticism, although of substantial interest and importance to educators, fails to apply very well to the special case of relations among reader, writer, and textbook. This article proposes a view of the school textbook as a unique form of document (from the Latin docere: to teach), and discusses some distinctive differences in construction and interpretation between literary texts and fact-stating textbooks, respectively.

It may well be that reading is, to adopt a phrase from Barthes (1986), “a plural field of scattered practices, of irreducible effects” (p. 33). Since reliance on the textbook today appears so pervasive and widespread—probably increasingly so due to pressures upon teachers and students for accountability and “quality control”—and because there has really not been much work done on the distinctive problems of reading school textbooks, it seems important to focus greater attention on this very peculiar textual form and on the peculiar sorts of reading and interpretation that invariably accompany its use. But this, it turns out, is quite difficult to do, because much of what has been written and said about interpretation and reader/writer/text relations has emerged from the field of literary criticism and fails to apply very well to the special case of relations

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1The EPIE (1977) Report found 65% of instructional time across grades K–12 involved the use of textbooks, although more recent studies of particular subjects/grade levels find textbook instruction constitutes as much as 90% of instructional time (Woodward, Elliot, & Nagel, 1986). Goodlad’s (1984) study reported textbooks to be the primary instructional medium. The reliance on a single textbook per subject, per grade, is typical.

2Apart from “readability” studies and with the notable exception of Smith’s (1964a, 1964b, 1965) studies, almost all textbook comprehension research has been conducted in the 1980s, with most of it appearing in the last 5 years.
among reader, writer, and textbook. The reason for this is that most theories of interpretation and of the reader's role in the construction of textual meaning are concerned with literary texts, and even the psycholinguistic research into reading comprehension that has dealt with language beyond word and sentence level, has similarly looked primarily at literary forms, typically at "stories," even though it is with expository rather than with literary texts that students have the greatest difficulty (N.A.E.P., 1982).

School textbooks, however, are not primarily literary texts, and this is increasingly so as students move from the elementary to the secondary grades. So although there is much that is promising in current work on interpretation, the authority of the teacher, the author function, and the role of the reader, this work applies primarily to literary texts, whereas school textbooks are less often literary texts and more often what I shall henceforth call "fact-stating" texts. These require, it is argued here, a separate and different treatment.

This article begins by briefly noting some perspectives from literary theory that have guided and continue to guide English teachers' interactions with students and literary texts, and then considers the special problems of interpretation and the role of the reader in the construction of meaning from fact-stating texts.

The focus of this article is on specifying some differences, which appear to be important ones, between forms of personal identity and "interpretive community" engendered by literary texts and fact-stating textbooks, respectively. The school textbook is treated here as a unique form of document, which encodes the peculiar literate practice of constructing unified textual "fact" out of diversified lived actuality (Smith, 1974). The categorical and conceptual procedures of fact-stating textbooks, it is argued, constitute an interpretive schema that not only confers objectivity upon the subject matter studied, but—reciprocally—constitutes student readers as an interpretive community in a very different and possibly contradictory sense from that in which an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) operates to inform the reading of literary texts. Understanding this difference, it is shown, may help us to explain the difficulty students experience in reading with understanding those nonliterary text forms that typify content-area textbooks.

3A useful review of psycholinguistic research into the contents and methods of textbook-based instruction is Hartman (1989), which makes clear that, even in this newly emerging research focus, the question of interpretation is treated as unproblematic, since comprehension is invariably taken to mean accessing literal text meaning (construed as objective information) as revealed by recall of textually given answers to lower-level questions.

4I'm resorting to the awkward locution "fact-stating texts" in preference to the more conventional characterization of such texts as "expository." This is because exposition can include both description and argumentation. Using the term "fact-stating texts" makes explicit that the content of these texts is largely description and definition. However much one might feel it to be an essential constituent of educational textbooks, in most such texts, argumentation is significant by its absence.
SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF LITERARY THEORY

This section considers some possible contributions of literary theory to our understanding of textbook reading and interpretation. It excludes the reading and interpretation of literary texts used as textbooks in school because, as was mentioned at the outset, this latter concern has had far more extensive treatment in the literary-critical, psycholinguistic, and educational literature than has the reading and interpretation of fact-stating texts. It is important to keep in mind, then, that what literary criticism offers us by way of insights into the reading process, has thus far entirely concerned literary texts, understandably enough.

Teachers' beliefs about text interpretation will, obviously, shape the ways they mediate their students' interaction with texts. When text interpretation meant the recovery of the author's intended meaning, teachers spoke about "the" meaning of a text, taught about authorial "life and times" and mediated their students' reading accordingly. Subsequently, English teachers nurtured on New Criticism were taught that the proper practice of literary criticism required readers to expunge from their interpretation of the text any subjective or idiosyncratic elements, and to seek for meanings that appeared objective, analytically accessible, and verifiable. The idea that the meaning is in the text, and that it is stable and determinate, correlativey implied the existence of interpretive authority and "correct" interpretation. This view has lost favor among many contemporary literary critics, along with the idea of "correct" interpretation, whether this is construed as the recovery of the authors' intended meaning or as the recovery of the meaning "in the text" itself.

With the abandonment of these traditional "fixed-meaning" views of text interpretation, many English teachers are taking an interest in more recent literary theories of reader "reception," which reinstate the reader as an active participant in the reading process. Two forms of reader-response theory have been particularly well received: these are Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of reader-text transaction and Fish's (1980) theory of interpretive communities. Rosenblatt argues that text interpretation is always an interplay between two sets of codes, that of the author and that of the reader, and between two sets of values. She urges that "the symbols on the page are, at best, only partial indicators of their linguistic referents" and that it is the reader who "brings the text to completion" (p. 88). Fish, for his part, relocates interpretation beyond the individual, to what he calls the "interpretive community." He argues that "public norms which shape and constrain meaning are not embedded in the language, but in the situations of readers" and concludes that "... meanings are the property neither of fixed and stable texts, nor of free and independent readers, but of interpretive communities" (p. 322).

On the other hand, of course, this movement can be seen to challenge traditional teacher authority. As Crossman (1980) points out "... the kind and extent of a teacher's authority in matters of interpretation hang on whether or not
readers make literary meaning" (p. 149). But this challenging of teacher authority with respect to text interpretation merely deflects it to a different—arguably more appropriate level—than that of dictating correct interpretation; it now becomes relocated to an authoritative guidance of what Culler (1980) refers to as "literary competence": the interpretive mores and particular conventions of literary discourse that render criticism a systematic and disciplined engagement. For all the educational value and justification such critical theories might have for teachers' practice, however, outside the English class, most student textbooks are likely to remain "beyond criticism." Why is this so? What makes textbooks different?

WHAT MAKES TEXTBOOKS DIFFERENT?

First, consider the textbook's distinctive function. Of the many kinds of texts available to the modern reader, the school textbook bears a unique and significant social function: to represent to each generation of students a sanctioned version of human knowledge and culture. Since the inception of mass schooling, the basis of the school textbook's authority was its socializing function: a common curriculum was supposed to render homogeneous an ethnolinguistically diverse populace, and that sentiment is of course echoed today in calls for an authoritative core curriculum based upon "what every American needs to know" (Hirsch, 1987).

The fact-stating textbook holds a special place in the cultural archive of accumulated texts. It most typically attempts to systematize and simplify traditional fields and forms of knowledge comprehensively and in accordance with disciplinary canons up to and including the disciplines' most recent developments. Whereas the literary text is, and remains, uniform and unchanged over time, disciplinary texts are constantly being revised, to reflect developments in the knowledge base, in pedagogy, and, not insignificantly though not central to this article's purpose, developments within the textbook marketplace itself.

Upper-level textbooks claim, as elementary-level texts do not, to present a comprehensive overview of the subject, an intent that is reflected in typical textbook titles such as Introduction to Biology, Modern Chemistry, Elements of Meteorology, and Understanding Social Science. What is crucial to these textbooks is their claim to facticity, to telling the objective truth about their subject matter in a manner suitable for consumption by students from any and every ethnolinguistic background. This, too, is in contrast to literary texts, for which both literary criticism and psycholinguistics (through schema theory) generally acknowledge the constitutive role of individual and community background as giving rise to legitimate interpretive variation. Even though, logically, the same

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5See, for example, Hartman & Spiro's (1989) application of poststructuralist theory to expository text comprehension.
considerations must apply, nevertheless the meaning of “factual” textbooks is, by contrast, supposed to be transparently accessible to the competent reader and to be unaffected by either subjective or social background. Hence, in dealing with expository texts, schema-theoretic research has acknowledged the interpretive contributions of variable background knowledge and experience, but only in order to determine ways in which this interpretive variation might be overcome, so that readers can access and “comprehend” the same text meaning.

A great deal has been written and continues to be written on the fragility of the distinction between factual and fictional texts, on what White (1978) called the “fictions of factual representation.” It is not the purpose of this article to rehearse such work but rather to merely recall to mind the many discussions that point out a reliance, in purportedly prosaic factual texts, upon literary forms and poetic strategies. Textbooks appear to differ from literary texts both substantially, in terms of the kind of texts they are, and pragmatically, in terms of the social practices surrounding their use. But whereas substantially, in terms of their intrinsic linguistic features, textbooks and literary texts may be seen to occupy different points along the same continuum, in terms of the social practices of reading, textbooks and literary texts are typically treated as dichotomous. In the particular case of textbooks designed to transmit objective, factual information, then, it is important to bear in mind that, despite many textbooks’ evident reliance upon what are clearly literary resources, the recovery of intended meaning defines the student readers’ role. Little theoretical attention has been given to problems of interpretation with respect to fact-stating texts because, presumably, it is believed that, being factual and objective, there is nothing to interpret: the only issues here concern reading ability and text comprehension. Both in theory and in practice, fact-stating textbooks are regarded from a New Criticism stance: interpretation means accessing the determinate meaning in the text. Current teaching practices, says Van Peer (1989), “seem to suggest that everything to be learned from a text may be found in the text itself” (p. 280), as many teachers, and most students, are encouraged to take literally the question of what the book “says.”

This presumed objectivity of fact-stating textbooks applies, incidentally, just as much to the author, and to theories of the authority of the author, as it does to the role of the reader. Rarely do we find teachers devoting energy to the “life and times” of textbook authors, not least because often the “author” is a committee—of teachers, academics, various specialists, and consultants. Not only the subjectivity of the reader, then, but the subjectivity of the author, too, must be irrelevant to textbook interpretation, at least in the sense that any possibility of identifying “correct interpretation” with “authors’ intended meaning” disappears. But if the intentionalist thesis doesn’t arise here, it is often replaced by an

6See, by way of illustration, the arguments offered in Olson’s “On the Language and Authority of Textbooks” (reprinted in de Castell et al., 1988).
even more imposing form of authority, because school textbooks derive their authority from being "authorized," not from being authored.

The school textbook, then, is unique in its culturally stipulated role of authority. Textbooks are selected, authorized, and prescribed by regional agencies and/or government ministries of education, and tests of textbook knowledge constitute the principal basis for student progress, for selection or exclusion from further educational opportunity, and for the centralization of bureaucratic control through teacher, school, and district accountability to state education authorities. Increasingly, textbooks inscribe particular forms of institutional authority, in the sense that, increasingly, they are designed to prescribe instructional practices as well as curricular content (de Castell & Luke, 1987). Usurping teacher autonomy in the name of standards of equity and efficiency, this strategy substantially shapes and limits the kinds of reading practices to which teachers might otherwise be able to introduce their students.

Hence, textbooks are a "purpose-built" technology for the transmission of accumulated cultural and scientific knowledge that has been accorded the status of fact. From this standpoint, it seems appropriate to look at the textbook as a document.

Definitionally, at least, the textbook is a prime exemplar of the document. "Document" is from "docere" (Latin), meaning "to teach." Clanchy (1979) reports, interestingly, that the word 'documentum' as used in 11th-century England probably meant oral instruction, rather than writing. At any rate the meaning of "document" as we have it today refers to an original or official paper relied upon as basis, proof, support, or evidence, an authoritative form of writing that conveys information. "Documentation" is the furnishing or authenticating with documents, or the assembling, coding, and dissemination of recorded knowledge treated as an integral procedure.

School textbooks appear to function like documents—they "state facts" about events entirely objectively conceived. Documents, like their forerunners the sword, the holy relic, and before these, the sacred oath taken on one's own head or in the name of God, constitute testimony to the truth. Documentary texts, by tradition, function as evidence of the truth, not as explanation of it. Textbooks are treated like documents: they are not to be challenged, neither are they to be interpreted.

A good deal of evidence for the claim that they are indeed treated this way comes from numerous studies describing textbook-based teaching practices. Although practices do obviously vary, certain fairly typical patterns of textbook teaching emerge. First, elementary teachers rarely prepare students or assist them in comprehending their textbook reading, supporting McGinitie's (1986) assertion that "it is in the content areas that we currently do the worst job of teaching reading comprehension . . . that we most effectively teach children not to read" (p. 263). Nor, it appears, will typical textbook-based instruction teach students to think about what they've read. The paradigmatic form of teacher-student interac-
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In one study around textbook content appears to be recitation: a barrage of literal questions fired at students, followed by short answers. Reliance on questions provided in commercially produced textbooks fares no better: Armbruster & Ostertag's (1987) comprehensive study of fourth- and fifth-grade science texts, for example, found that both provided primarily lower-level cognitive questions that needed little or no inference and required only textual searches—developing a kind of “reading with incomprehension” based on skilled “copy-matching” (Cole & Griffin, 1986) between the wording of the question and the wording of the text. Perhaps the most interesting finding relevant to ways of engaging students’ intelligence in working with texts is Stodolsky (1988), based on observations of 39 fifth-grade math and social studies classrooms. She found that “higher challenges,” that is, a more demanding, higher-level treatment of content, occurred when students worked alone or in a group rather than when a teacher was directly involved.

Hartman’s (1989) review of research into secondary-level teaching practices reveals similar patterns, and similarly supports the view that reading instruction, reading comprehension—and indeed, reading at all—fares worst in the content areas. In the first place, very little extended independent reading actually goes on—from 2% to 10% of class time (Goodlad, 1984; Greenewald & Wolfe, 1981). A kind of “public” reading does go on, though (taking up to 60% of instructional time, in Greenewald and Wolfe’s study), which takes the form of “micro-bursts” of reading, mixed with writing, listening, and speaking activities (Dolan, Harrison, & Gardner, 1979). In the secondary classroom, as in the elementary, very little preparation is given for reading assignments, which in any case, appear to be minimal (Smith & Feathers, 1983a), and there is little instruction in text comprehension. At the secondary level, too, students are helped to understand textbook content—through lectures, films, discussions, and so on—but not to understand the textbook itself, which is seen as standing in need of support by other instructional media or by being “told”—again, precisely the practice McGinitie and McGinitie (1986) describe as “teaching students not to read.” This latter, at least, students appeared to have learned with some measure of success. Smith and Feathers (1983b) found that teachers they interviewed did not expect students to read without inducement, and estimated that only about 50% of their students actually did assigned reading. Rieck (1977) found the majority of student interviewees estimated that they completed under half of each reading assignment, and even this was done by skimming and copy-matching the text for answers to worksheet questions, while Smith and Feathers (1983a) report many students avoid reading the text by copying other students’ worksheets or filling in answers as the teachers review the worksheet in class. Worksheets whose questions require only copy-matching of answers from the text, low-level teacher questions and pseudo-questions (to which students already knew the answers), rapid-fire question-and-answer drills and minilectures by the teacher further characterized textbook-based instruction at the secondary level.
Van Peer (1989) has suggested that “learning experiences are shaped according to structural models of interaction developed within the context of the educational institution” (p. 277). And it certainly appears that prevailing modes of classroom work with textbooks are structured more by canonical turntaking patterns of teacher-student interaction than they are by the linguistic character and pragmatic function of texts as vehicles for preserving and transmitting cultural information.

In essence, students are not taught to read textbooks, they are taught to cite them. It is not facts and information that are nurtured, but statements and evidence. This is revealed in the ways that students fail to understand textbook content (Michaels & Bruce, 1988), giving accounts in which “because” functions evidentially, as it does in citation, not causally, as in explanation.

Olson (1988) has likened the textbook to the religious ritual, as a “device for putting ideas and beliefs above criticism” (p. 241). And our everyday idioms reflect this: a “textbook tactic” is carried out “by the book” (and “to the letter”). It exemplifies, in classic form, the way things should be done—a “textbook case” is unquestionably correct, “open and shut,” even if, as the research shows, more often “shut” than “open.”

FACTUAL TEXTS AND THE (NON) PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

Fact-stating texts are referential. The linguistic meaning of sentences conveys information about the actual world. Literary texts, by contrast, are nonreferential or, more precisely, “pseudo-referential” (Stierle, 1980, p. 83): the fictional text gets us to construct, by pseudoreference, an imaginary world. Of course, any figure can be read referentially or rhetorically (Culler, 1980), which is why we need to distinguish between kinds of texts, and kinds of practices surrounding their reading and interpretation. We can classify texts according to form and function (e.g., de Castell, 1990; Olson, 1988), and we can differentiate distinctive reader attitudes toward, or modes of engaging with, texts (Wells, 1988). Particular forms, functions, and modes of reader engagement are typically found together; nevertheless, we can always deviate from typical combinations as we do, for instance, when in schools we treat literary works as instructional texts, or supply narrative readings of theoretical texts (Walker, 1987) or theory-driven readings of children’s primers (Luke, 1988).

In describing a continuum of possible stances readers might adopt in their relationship with a text, Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes two polarities, which she terms “aesthetic” and “efferent” readings. A distinction is made between the metaphorically generated ambiguity essential to constructing meaning in literary texts, and the disambiguation, assisted by the use of neutral symbolizations such as those of logic, mathematics, and chemistry, needed for the kind of reading in which the reader attempts to isolate objective information. In such a reading,
Rosenblatt writes, "the reader must adopt the attitude of mind, the stance, that will lead him automatically to reject or inhibit any personal associations activated by the symbols" (p. 73). Whereas this difference is not normally intrinsic to the text, the rhetorical strategies productive of a "scientific reading" are built into school textbooks by design, and textbook statements are to be regarded and treated as facts.

In her discussion of "the social construction of documentary reality," Smith (1974) stresses that "The factual property of a statement is not intrinsic to it" (p. 258). Facts are socially organized and constructed. They are dependent for their very existence upon the existence of documents, and they are what they are because of particular, highly specialized and socially organized documentary practices that preconstruct both reader and interpretation in the very construction of the textbook, just as in the very construction of the document itself. The factual status of a statement, Smith argues, is a function of both the readers' method of reading and the writer's method of telling that encourages such a reading. To change statements of the form "I believe" or "I think" into factual statements, Smith goes on to explain, is more than just a syntactical or logical transformation. It changes the relations among reader, writer, and text: between the teller and what is told, between the knower and the known, between the teller and the hearer.

If knower and known are mutually and reciprocally determined, then the preconstruction of the known prior to the knower's entry into relation with it also, correlative, preconstructs the reader. What kind of reader identity is rhetorically constructed in fact-stating textbooks? To the extent that such texts are regarded and treated as factual, the rhetorically projected persona of the reader is as cipher, devoid of subjectivity, time, place, or perspective. Knowledge is provided independent of any particular subjectivities. This is a view of knowledge, Smith remarks, "which holds that to be properly a knowledge it must somehow transcend the social contexts to which the knower is necessarily bound" (Smith, 1974, p. 257). Far from the recognition that, as Fish (1980) puts it, "it is only in situations . . . that one is called on to understand" (p. 304), the actual reader's own situation is treated as a contaminant. So, too, are the actual situations out of which documented "facts" have been constructed, and this is reflected in the predominance in textbooks of the kind of knowledge Watson (1985) has called "archival"—consisting largely of abstract definitions of terms. While discipline-specific terminology is consistently focused on in textbooks, neither high-level conceptualizations, inference, integration, nor discipline-specific discourse forms or functions are much in evidence (Hartman, 1989). Armbruster and Ostertag (1987) conclude one study of elementary science text questions by remarking that, in the textbook curriculum, "What really counts is names, definitions and other facts that can be assessed 'objectively'" (p. 15).

7The argument here is Smith's.
The peculiar literate practices of reporting and recording, although they are decisive to the character of the reality documented, are, as Smith points out, nowhere visible in the document itself. The same is true of textbooks studied by Calfee (1987) and Chambliss (1987a, 1987b), which were found to be primarily descriptive, consisting of lists of facts whose relationship was unclear, and those studied by Kantor, Anderson, & Armbruster (1983), in which connections between and among events and statements were largely absent, as was perspective or point of view. What student readers are thereby induced to overlook is that facts are not the same as factual statements, nor are they the same as the actuality that factual statements represent. The social practice of the construction of textual fact out of lived actuality, and its representation in the factual statement, in the textbook as in the document, separates knower from known, constructing the known as external, objective, and in particular, as “the same” for each and every reader at any and every occasion of reading. The working up of raw actuality into documentary statements of fact, Smith tells us, proceeds through the assignment of descriptive categories and a conceptual structure demarcating what actually happened as objective “event” or “state of affairs.”

These categorical and conceptual procedures which name, analyze and assemble what actually happened become (as it were) inserted into the actuality as an interpretive schema which organizes it for us as it is or was. Using that interpretive schema to organize the actuality does not appear as imposing an organization upon it but rather as the discovery of how it is. (Smith, 1974, p. 258)

Just as texts both presuppose and construct their readers, so they rhetorically construct communities of readers. For of course the externalization of what may have been multiple and differently experienced raw actuality into an isolated, disambiguated, and objective “fact” does create a complementary organization of knowledge. Since the fact is the same for all knowers in all situations, facts coordinate readers into communities of knowers, all of whom know “the same thing.” This “sameness,” Smith tells us, “is a product of a social organization in which the knower may treat her knowledge as what is or could be known by anyone else” (p. 259). Documentary texts thus constitute a kind of “epistemological socialization” in which, in Smith’s words:

Factual organization implicates the knower in an act which reaches through the object to a knower ‘on the other side’ for whom that object is identical. It sets up relations of equivalence therefore among knowers such that they are formally interchangeable. Through the fact we are related . . . to other knowers who have known it and who may know it, since in the social organization of fact we enter a relation of knowing in which it does not matter who we are, where we stand, for we constitute it as known the same. (Smith, 1974, p. 259)
The textbook thus seeks to expunge both itself and the reader as unique entities: the text itself is designed to be transparent, with denotative reference replacing connotative sense as far as possible, through the medium of optimally neutral, unambiguous, and unevocative language; readers lose their subjectivity, their distinctive personalities, histories, and particular perspectives, and the community of readers becomes, ideally, a set of interchangeable ciphers, deciphering the same knowledge in the same way.

**SO WHAT? AND WHAT DO WE DO FROM HERE?**

When Popeye said "I can read readin', but I can't read writin'," he was probably talking about the same thing (more or less!) as Roland Barthes (1974) when he asked

> Why is the writerly [text] our value? Because the goal of literary work . . . is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. The reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive . . . Opposite to the writerly text, then, is its counter-value, its negative, reactive value: What can be read, but not written: the readerly.

(p. 4)

Here again, of course, Barthes is talking about literary texts, but this is a major part of the point—that nearly all discussions of writer/reader/text relations do focus on the literary text . . . as does most classroom instruction in reading and writing. But it is not as if fact-stating textbooks required only comprehension, not interpretation. In the first place, textbook knowledge, as this article has tried to show, is already preinterpreted, facts are already "worked up," disengaged from their lived actuality, and re-presented as "factual statements." So presumably a kind of critical de-interpretation must be in order if textbook knowledge is to be comprehended causally, rather than simply parroted back evidentially in assignments and exams.

In the second place, it increasingly appears as if comprehension may indeed require interpretation; that is, it appears as if a thorough, flexible, and transferable understanding of subject-matter knowledge and its applications in real-life settings may require that texts be actively worked on by readers attempting to construct models, to formulate and extend hypotheses as they read, and to re-situate the textbook's unsituated account (see, especially, Hartman & Spiro, 1989; Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungaran, & Boerger, 1987; Van Peer, 1989). Certainly these interpretative activities are prerequisite to any ability to relate the production of the kinds of accounts documentary texts supply to the actual social practices of documentation as empirical knowledge construction.
Textbooks, like documents, are a subspecies of a larger and more general discourse form, and they share in its purpose: to preserve and transmit cultural norms, beliefs, and value orientations over time and space. To function effectively, texts must recover this pragmatic dimension, and this requires that we find practices of reading that bring textually encoded cultural information "back to life" in the actual occurrent oral present of the times and places in which they are inserted. For this purpose, even understanding what one reads does not go far enough. Lynn (1985) reports comparative literature scholar Paul Hernandi's proposal that readers need to go beyond understanding to what he called "overstanding," the critical assessment of how texts may be partially blind to the historical conditions that motivate them. This is the moment in which critique is given. Yet another moment is necessary to the fullest use of texts, however, and this is the moment of what Hernandi calls "standing in," that is, of taking up a text for one's own purposes and thereby expanding its meaning. (p. 71)

Because minds are not like libraries into which unanalyzed texts can be deposited or files into which uninterpreted documents can be stored, recovering the pragmatic function of informational texts entails a distinctive practice of reading, actively working on such texts, taking them apart to see how they were put together, and putting them back together in new, different ways, to see not only what, but how they mean, not only what they report, but how such a report has been worked up and what else it might have included, but did not. If textually inert cultural information is to be revivified, as must be the intention in educational contexts, then what is principally at stake is not authorial intention (as it might be supposed to be in, say, the reading of a will), nor the integrity of the text itself (as might be forcefully argued in the case of many literary texts), but the development of the readers' ability to engage intelligently—meaning also morally and emotionally as well as purely cognitively—with what, and how, a text can tell. And how it can tell both truths and fictions. And how to tell the two apart. And why it is important to do so.

The purpose of teaching the textbook is to impart knowledge. On any definition of knowledge some persuasive grounds for its acceptance must be given. "Just following orders" is as notoriously a poor reason for conviction as it is for action. If, as the research cited indicates, it is by repressively reduced discourse, disconnected statements of fact, the rhetorical silencing of questions and criticisms, disregard and even disrespect for audience, that student readers are exhorted to accept the truth of textbook statements of fact, then their assent is built on coercion, not persuasion—a not untypical relation between power and knowledge, to be sure, but one whose centrality to text-based instruction ought greatly to be questioned.

Most textbooks, however, militate against teachers' attempts at critical media-
tion because they are not well understood by teachers themselves and for good reason, since all too often they are "inconsiderately" written (Armbuster, 1984), inaccurate, confused, full of irrelevancies, and structurally incoherent (Calfee, 1987; Chambliss, 1987a, 1987b; Michaels & Bruce, 1988).

Such texts provide not so much an education but a form of metatextual socialization, which, however, isn't a socialization into the discourses of biology or history or geography, but a socialization into a particular intransitive relation to documentary reality on the one hand, and into a particular ideological view of disciplinary knowledge on the other. It is a view that fails to acknowledge that science in particular, and knowledge production in general, is a social practice, and that, as Whitehead put it quite some time ago:

We don't build up our laws out of neutral, innocent facts; 'the facts,' rather, are constituted by us when we examine nature through the grid of a hypothesis that suits our purposes—purposes that are not arbitrary or fortuitous, of course, but consistent with our ethical, social or political needs and wants. (in Crossman, 1980, p. 163)

Why is it that so much time is devoted to teaching students how authors of fictional texts construct fiction, and so little time to teaching students how authors of factual texts construct fact? Narrative, after all, is far easier to learn, and obviously more continuous with oral linguistic competence than is exposition. It is a universal form of structuration, of sense-making, to the extent that "storying" appears almost "innate" to our species. Even little children can manage to construct stories, and of course stories are far easier to read and interpret than are documents.

The point is not, I think, to treat fact-stating textbook as if they were literary texts, for there is something essential in our culture about the ability (which, however, is always only an ideal) to disengage our own personal interests from our perceptions of what is real, right, and true.

Nor do I think the solution is to "narrativize" fact-stating texts in order to make them more memorable and meaningful (contra, e.g., Egan, 1988). It makes more sense, I suggest, to regard textbook knowledge explicitly as a documentary construction, and the "facts" therein as documentary knowledge, that is, as built up by particular procedures of observation and practices of documentation. This doesn't mean that we treat textbooks as documents, that we ritualistically deploy them as citations to support a point of view or, far more typically, as evidence testifying to the student's right to proceed to the next level of instruction. It means, first and foremost, developing instruction in a distinctive form of reading and writing, a form of "documentary literacy," enabling readers to see how knowledge is put together by seeing how it can be taken apart. As students move through the years of formal schooling, their texts become increasingly more "documentary" in form and decreasingly, both literary and
narrative. Learning what counts as "fact" in our culture, learning how to tell "fact" from "fiction" is a large part of what education is about. But thus far it appears to contribute very little to the kinds of explicit instruction students are given about the reading and writing of texts. Without such instruction, however skilled students may become in the citation of facts, they are not much encouraged, either by their purpose-built textbooks or by their teachers, to develop an understanding of what, precisely, such facts amount to and why they are what they are. To this end, research is called for to identify and differentiate types of textbooks (with attention given to seeing how textbooks across all grades and subject areas vary), to identify and study distinctive practices and procedures of constructing—and deconstructing—documentary texts, and to see how the perspective from which different individuals and communities interpret texts varies, and relatedly, how "fact-stating" texts portray these various readerships.

Just as students can learn how to "author"—and thereby gain a measure of authority over—literary texts, so in parallel ways they can gain greater metatextual awareness of, and hence greater control over, both the processes of documentation and the rhetorical strategies for the composition of fact-stating texts.

REFERENCES


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