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A NOVEL APPROACH TO WRITING TEXTS

William E. Fulmer, Clarion University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

Traditional texts fall short of capturing student interest or enthusiasm for a subject. Educators have also found that many textbooks lack reader comprehensibility in relating the substance to real life situations.

The author believes that he has found a solution to both problems. Teaching production management from his "novel-text" has had excellent results. The author feels that more novel-texts will greatly improve students' understanding of, and preparation for business. He includes some suggestions for the authoring of novel-texts.

INTRODUCTION

Educators are presently using new techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of textbooks as teaching aids and learning devices. These techniques are clearly more sophisticated than the old "readability" formulae which are simply based upon surface aspects of texts (e.g. sentence and word length)[1]. There appears to be a growing consensus among educators that textbooks should be reader comprehensible, as measured by the reader's ability to infer causal connections and follow event chains (i.e. events, states, and actions) which are interrelated [i;2]. They suggest that textbooks should have "scripts," "episodes," or "character actions" from which the reader can construct causal explanations for subsequent actions or situations [3;4;3]. This enhances the reader's ability to understand and remember the substantive material.

Some modern authors have attempted to follow the educators' advice by including vignettes, small cases, or dialogue in their books. Unfortunately, these additions to standard text fare only succeed in making it more difficult for the reader to make the connections and predictions necessary from full comprehension. The inclusions often act as interference or distractions from the building chain of events.

There is also another side to the problem. Many students find textbooks boring. This is no great revelation to anyone who has studied or taught. Especially monotonous are the texts used in the required courses where students have little or no interest in the subject matter. Even an inspirational teacher may not offset the effects of a boring text, and students will still plod wearily through assigned readings without really appreciating the material contained therein.

Nowhere is this truth more evident than in the field of production management. The sad case is that most business students view a course in production management as a necessary evil, to be suffered through and endured. To those of us who have been involved with the management of production and who are aware of the real-life drama and excitement it offers, the attitudes of such students are difficult to fathom. Until we read the textbooks, that is!

The same student who tiresomely trudges through one chapter a week in his production management text will devour an entire Ken Follett novel at one sitting. Why? The novel is full of mystery, suspense, action and excitement. It has characters, life and interaction. It appeals to the imagination and creativity of the reader. The reader becomes involved in actively making connections between events, and in making predictions about outcomes. Interest soars as the reader is often right, but sometimes wrong in predicting results. The reader is "hooked."

AN APPLICATION

After a dozen years of living the business of production management I returned to academe to teach it. Through role plays, case studies, group discussions and field trips I was able to get students' interest aroused, and to reverse their attitudes about the field. They could see and appreciate the applications of quantitative material from their texts. Still, they had difficulty forcing themselves to read the "lifeless" assignments. Eventually the answer to the problem occurred to me--write a text that would include all the human drama which accompanies and breathes life into the quantitative issues.

Managing~ Production: The Adventure was written largely as a novel. In academic terms it is an ongoing case study. Characters are developed, mistakes take place, plots develop, and there is even some mystery and suspense. Reviewers tended to read the book at one sitting. Students often read ahead, and a few finish it during the first week.

The book involves the students by asking them to play a role--that of a newly employed management trainee in production management. The characters speak directly to the reader in many situations. In others the reader overhears conversations, receives company re-ports or handouts (with quantitative methods explained in detail), and is issued a copy of the operations manual and the collective bargaining agreement. The reader is assigned projects which are subsequently discussed and explained in class.

Teaching a class with the use of a novel as a text is nothing new, of course. Literature classes are commonly taught in that manner. For a business course to be taught that way is unusual to say the least. It requires an instructor who understands applications of principles, methods and techniques, and one who appreciates the fact that applications should accompany theoretical constructs in learning about business.

STUDENT REACTION

I have discovered that the use of a novel-text has a tendency to convert the classroom experience for students into a quasi-internship. Not only do they learn about the substantive topics, but in their imagination they actually observe the implementations

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in the complete setting. The “feeling a part of it” becomes a perceptual reality. Numbers are no longer mere blips of light on a calculator or computer display. They have meaning and can alter the outcomes of human events. Students see that their calculation of numbers and data will require people to change their behavior, their plans or their performances. Emotional responses to these numbers will directly involve the students. Students truly gain a sense of “being there.”

Those who attempt to teach business with a laboratory approach--wherein a topic is examined in isolation-- are frequently asked by students, “Can you give us an example of how that applies?” Students seek involvement beyond the focus of a single topic for at least two reasons. One, it helps them understand the topic better. And two, it is not as boring. With many of our students there is a third reason. Business students lean toward the practical. A subject which demonstrates practical applications is highly favored.

A comparison of student evaluations of texts in one study showed that my novel-text was rated much higher than a well-known standard text (3.31 compared with 2.92 on a 4.00 scale). There was no significant difference between student ratings of the faculty people involved (3.15 compared with 3.06), although both were rated well above average. The classes which used my text were larger (n = 36 and 31, compared with n = 26 and 22). This study confirmed my own experiences--that students develop a much higher interest in the subject, and that they learn the material more easily when using the novel-text.

SUGGESTIONS FOR AUTHORS

How does one include the various topics in a novel, especially the quantitative topics? The author must first determine a setting or an environment in which the topic would normally be employed. For instance, if the topic was long-range planning, then the corporate planning office would be suggested. Next the role of the reader must be determined. In the case of Production: The Adventure, the reader needed a great deal of mobility, i.e. an ability to move freely from one department to another (to learn about planning, quality control, materials management, industrial engineering, etc.). In my present text, Managing Human Resources: The Adventure Continues, the reader is centered in a large corporate office of human resource management. In both cases the reader becomes a “management trainee.” This is a role most students can easily identify, as it is the “position” most will be hired into.

Once the role and setting have been determined, the author should then outline some applications of the selected topics. Many of us have already prepared in-class cases or projects which might easily form the nucleus for the applications or for the text itself. The applications will point the direction for plots and character development by establishing application outcomes. It should be noted here that outcomes need not be correct or desirable. In fact the students may learn more from misapplied theory or techniques. How “not to” is often as important as “how to.” I must confess a tendency to lead students down an erroneous path, then demonstrate rather dramatic consequences.

Characterizations are drawn from our own observations and imagination, of course. Caution is urged in avoiding stereotypes, however. Even “poor” managers are right sometimes, just as good ones are not always correct. Characters should be revealed slowly throughout the book, rather than all at once. As we work with people we get to know them little by little. Characters who are revealed too quickly, or who are stereotypical have highly predictable behavior, and are therefore two-dimensional and boring.

Just as with character development, the reader-assigned projects should not reveal too much, too soon. Rarely are

real problems in business completely and distinctly laid out for the problem-solver. Information necessary for the solutions may be somewhat obscured--contained in a preceding chapter, buried in excess information, or available only through student research. A few projects may be included where there exists less than adequate data for the proper solution--just as in real life--where informed “guesstimates” must be made.

Throughout the writing of a novel-text the author must keep in mind the fact that classes delivered by an instructor will supplement the book. One of the functions of the classes will be to clarify the book’s material, to illustrate similar problems, and to discuss some of the accompanying theories and techniques. The instructor’s manual may well be the place to include those extra explanations, not the book itself. After all, we should leave something for the instructor to do.

CONCLUSION

Many traditional texts present us with two problems. First, students find them boring. Second, as pointed out by educational specialists, the piecemeal delivery makes it difficult to visualize connections or to draw inferences from specific topics to real life.

A novel-text has the advantage in that it can weave topics, demonstrate interrelationships, and show continuing illustrations of applications through its storyline. And a novel-text can capture the imagination and interest of its readers through the action and connected chains of events. Its readers are far more likely to draw inferences, predict outcomes, and otherwise become involved in the unfolding story. This leads to more lively classroom discussions, which more frequently result in better understandings of the substantive issues and topics.

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