

Professor: 'Textbooks are enemies of education'

The PreK-12 education system is becoming increasingly centralized. As I've pointed out [before](#), the number of school districts in America has *decreased by over 90%* since FDR's New Deal.

With this increased centralization—and the standardized tests that have come with it—teachers have lost a lot of autonomy over their classrooms and what gets taught in them. Happily, some teachers are now speaking out against this loss of autonomy.

However, on the whole, I've found that most teachers do not really want much creative freedom over what they teach. They don't want the extra work. They don't want the preparatory study it involves. They *want* to be handed a pre-packaged curriculum that they can merely flip through each day.

They want textbooks.

And textbook companies have obliged. Currently, revenue from PreK-12 instructional materials in the U.S. is somewhere around \$8 billion per year.

Admittedly, textbooks can be a handy resource for the busy teacher. But on the whole, have they been bad for education?

Former NYU Professor [Neil Postman](#) was unequivocal in his distaste for textbooks. In his provocatively-titled book [The End of Education](#), here's what he wrote:

"We can improve the quality of teaching and learning overnight by getting rid of all textbooks. Most textbooks are badly written and, therefore, give the impression that the subject is boring. Most textbooks are also impersonally

written. They have no 'voice,' reveal no human personality. Their relationship to the reader is not unlike the telephone message that says, 'If you want further assistance, press two now.' I have found the recipes on the backs of cereal boxes to be written with more style and conviction than most textbook descriptions of the causes of the Civil War. Of the language of grammar texts, I will not even speak. To borrow from Shakespeare, it is unfit for a Christian ear to endure. **But worse than this, textbooks are concerned with presenting the facts of the case (whatever the case may be) as if there can be no disputing them, as if they are fixed and immutable.** And still worse, there is usually no clue given as to who claimed these are the facts of the case, or how 'it' discovered these facts (there being no he or she, or I or we). There is no sense of the frailty or ambiguity of human judgment, no hint of the possibilities of error. Knowledge is presented as a commodity to be acquired, never as a human struggle to understand, to overcome falsity, to stumble toward the truth.

Textbooks, it seems to me, are enemies of education, instruments for promoting dogmatism and trivial learning. They may save the teacher some trouble, but the trouble they inflict on the minds of students is a blight and a curse."

To summarize, Postman believed that textbooks generally are poorly written and tend to give students a false sense of knowing a subject... while at the same time dramatically reducing their interest in that subject. In their condensed nature, textbooks inevitably omit complexity while at the same time portraying themselves as exhaustive.

Would you agree with Postman? Should teachers today be encouraged to rely less upon textbooks and more upon primary sources?