Dangerous Writing
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As a political philosophy, neoliberalism construes a rationale for a handful of private interests to control as much of social life as possible to maximize their financial investments. Unrestricted by legislation or government regulation, market relations as they define the economy are viewed as a paradigm for democracy itself. Central to neoliberal philosophy is the claim that the development of all aspects of society should be left to the wisdom of the market.

—Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux

This year, like every year, textbook publishers sponsored a book fair and free lunch in my department. Eerily polite and deferential book reps from the major publishers displayed large stacks of texts. While some literary anthologies were among the offerings, the vast majority were textbooks for writing classes, and the annual event is intended primarily for first-year writing staff. Indeed, the reps pay the writing program a fee in order to participate; with the stacks of textbooks, the business cards, and the smiles come free sandwiches and sodas. This event has become an entrenched part of the general scene in my department, coming with the same mundane regularity as the Christmas party and factional squabbling. It is also remarkably different from the other regular happenings in the department because it directly integrates private industry and marketing into the fabric of the departmental culture and work. Publishers make their presence felt in a host of other ways, such as by sending out free textbooks and e-mails that advertise particular books and soliciting paid reviews. A few publishers are now sponsoring research in the field, and publishers are ubiquitous at the annual College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference. In fact, major events at each conference are sponsored by the publishers and have become deeply ingrained in conference cultures. At the CCCC, meetings with free food and alcohol at publishers’ parties are a regular part of the established routines of conference goers. At the NCTE
conference, a line at least one hundred yards long typically begins to form outside of the book expo long before it opens on the first day. When the doors are opened, a crush of conference-goers rushes inside to collect promotional giveaways from the publishers. People walk away with bags filled with everything from pens and pencils to tote bags and book covers—all with publishers’ logos prominently displayed. These upfront expenditures on building relationships and establishing name recognition are testament to the fact that textbooks are big business. The number of titles available for composition alone is overwhelming. From the major publishers—Bedford/St. Martin’s, Pearson, Longman, Allyn and Bacon, and Houghton Mifflin—one can choose from over 500 titles of rhetorics, readers, and handbooks.

The relationship between the textbook industry and college writing says much about the political economy of work in composition. I recently got an e-mail from a publishing rep asking me to participate in what the message called a “Rhetoric Symposium” being held in a southwestern state. The publisher offered to pay for all travel expenses and provide a $250 “honorarium for completing a preparatory assignment and participating in the symposium.” Reflecting the murky position of college writing instruction as a quasi-professional, quasi-scholarly endeavor, the description of the purpose of the symposium is a strained conflation of professional development, consultation, and market development:

The symposium features discussion among fifteen instructors who teach this course at colleges and universities around the country, and will include in-depth discussions about technology tools. For two days, we will focus on the challenges faced by you and your students, ways in which other instructors are confronting these challenges, and how we as a dedicated publisher of course materials can support your efforts.

The roundtable forum and small group size allows for lively and engaging discussions. Faculty members bring different experiences to the table, which stimulates rich discussion both during the symposium program and in after-hours conversation. Participants at other symposia have left the meetings with a variety of new ideas to implement in their courses and share with their departments. Discussions span how to best organize course material, how to integrate technology, and how to better motivate students.

This input will help us develop better instructional materials for instructors and your students—participants will impact the publishing decisions we
make. Participants are asked to help facilitate discussion on a particular topic at the symposium. This format allows members of the publishing team to focus on discussion, and it puts control in the hands of instructors! And, we promise that at no time during the weekend will we try to sell anything—this is a developmental endeavor.

As a writing program director with a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition, I don’t think I am the primary target audience of this form letter. As with the www.adjuncts.com Web site discussed in the previous chapter, the rhetoric seems particularly crafted for contingent faculty. This symposium, it is asserted, will put “control in the hands of instructors!” This seems to indicate that the primary target audience is those who don’t feel that they have much control, and perhaps don’t feel that they have a voice in any professional forum outside of their own classrooms.

There are overt economic factors at play here as well that help to further contextualize the symposium, its purposes, and the complex of motivations and terms of work to which it responds. Textbook marketing techniques, and practices with textbooks, are among the factors that can mark the distinction between a professional and a more bureaucratic orientation in postsecondary writing. Scholars who have professional status tend to learn about and discuss classroom issues in scholarly forums, and those forums lend us a voice, help us to grow as professionals, and provide opportunities for professional advancement. Scholars read and sometimes write journal articles and attend and present at conferences. This activity is institutionally supported, recognized, and rewarded as part of our professional work. Most of us get some measure of funding for travel to conferences; we add publications and conference presentations to our curriculum vitae, and such activities are typically incorporated as important factors in professional review processes. This publisher-sponsored symposium is a part of a process that bypasses that institutionally supported, scholarly realm of rhetoric and composition, describing a forum in which largely contingent teachers of composition talk directly with “the publishing team.” Who exactly composes the publishing team (and what its aims and general orientation are) remains vague, but one imagines that this is a group working for the publisher seeking to gain information and feedback from the teachers for new products. Participants are expected to come to the gathering with materials and to facilitate discussions as well as participate. In short, a large part of this exchange can be described as consultation, and consultancy in other
industries at similar events is compensated at significantly higher rates: in many industries over $100 an hour, and in fields like medicine and technology over $200 an hour. In this two-day consultation session, however, teachers are asked to work for something for which they are quite likely already accustomed to working: proxy capital. Their own professional development, rather than dollars, is their primary compensation. Fair compensation for travel and professional consultation seems beside the point—this is not a for-profit company looking for information and market development opportunities, but “a dedicated publisher of course materials” that only wants to “support” teachers. Teachers at all levels are conditioned to see their work in terms of social altruism and individual development rather than as adequately compensated, highly skilled professional labor. Many K-12 teachers draw on their own incomes to provide everything from books, paper, and chalk to food for breakfast and snacks for their students. They also often finance their own professional development through paying their own way to conferences and getting advanced degrees. Although higher degrees do typically bring a bump in pay, they are primarily compensated for their extra efforts with love and professional satisfaction. In the humanities in higher education, before we reach an institutionally recognized professional position, we likewise often trade in status and future recognition rather than in real wages. For instance, when graduate students are asked to perform some free labor—help administer a conference, lead a workshop, pick up a job candidate—they are often told that this will be “another line on your vita,” or “a chance to better get to know so-and-so.”

Eileen Schell writes about “psychic income,” another form of proxy capital (1998). She relates a story from Alice Gillam in which an adjunct faculty member complained about her pay and was told by an administrator that she was not working for pay, but for the psychic income of teaching at a university (40). Psychic income is the alleged privilege and status of teaching at a postsecondary institution and the satisfaction that comes with being able to do it well. It isn’t real income (wages), nor is it even the type of proxy income that is institutionally supported and eventually realized as professional advancement. Psychic income is a more transparent form of exploitation and it is baldly indicative of low-status work. It is closely associated with “women’s work”—work that may be occasionally recognized by a legitimated authority figure for its importance, but not valued in broader political economic terms and which doesn’t lead to transferable capital or legitimate professional
status.\footnote{See also Enos (1996), Fontaine and Hunter (1992), Holbrook (1991), Strickland (2001), and Wills (2004) for discussions of gender and discounted labor in academia.} It comes when labor is couched in the language of sacrifice and dedication—rather than credentials, knowledge, and expertise. Psychic income is therefore, as Katherine Wills argues, both a means of justifying low pay among some administrators, and a means of rationalizing the low status that comes with the work among contingent faculty themselves:

For adjuncts driven by the need of psychic income, fair compensation can take second place to self-perceptions of an altruistic ethos. Women, especially, seem to be willing to work to satisfy abstract concepts of duty or service because part-time teaching falls within a discourse of philanthropy and the respectable, nurturing mother-teacher. (2004, 202)

As Wills points out, psychic income is short-lived: not only do real economic pressures impinge on the lives of contingent teachers, but the more contact they have with the fiercely maintained hierarchies of higher education, the more they realize that their status is never genuine. Wills cites the high burnout rate among contingent faculty as evidence of this cycle of hope and disillusionment. She makes the case that those who seek to enact solutions to the problem of exploited teaching labor in composition through organizing contingent faculty need to account for the powerful but false lure of psychic income (201).

Textbooks are not only an integral part of the cultures of writing programs, they are among the factors that relate work in composition to service work in the fast-capitalist economy more generally. Teachers who work in primary and secondary education are happy to get free pens, posters, and book bags to bring back to classrooms, even when they advertise products. Contingent writing teachers in postsecondary education are targeted by Web sites that show empathy for their institutional positions and events like this “symposium” that seem to lend professional status through valuing their opinions and experience. Commodities with well-defined markets, textbooks appeal to a broad “we” that can be taken for the national, generic ethos of FYC—and as textbooks appeal to this ethos, they help to reproduce it.

In this chapter, I will examine textbooks as a part of the past and present political economics of composition. Given their omnipresence, it is surprising that the function and character of textbooks and the
textbook industry isn’t emphasized more in research. When we do discuss textbooks, it is tempting to frame the material present of our work as an outcome of a scholarly past—an effort to reify our own disciplinary legitimacy and professional status. In scholarly metanarratives, our roots are primarily in rhetoric, education, literacy studies, and linguistics. The contemporary field rejected formalism and current-traditionalism (sort of); we moved through expressivism and cognitivism, developing and (in some cases) eventually problematizing “process.” Textbooks might easily be thought of as being subsumed within this scholarly trajectory: when scholars tended to be formalist, textbooks were largely formalist; when process gained ascendancy, textbooks became more process-oriented. However, while textbooks do resonate with the most generic aspects of general scholarly trends, they have not kept in step with where the scholarly field has moved. David Bleich notes that textbooks function to homogenize and promote an inert, disempowering “normal science” (1999, 16). Kurt Spellmeyer similarly argues that textbooks are involved in “the social production of banality” and are “almost inevitably . . . out of date by the time they leave the bindery” (1999, 47). Xin Liu Gale and Frederic G. Gale note that

As composition and rhetoric becomes increasingly a more complex discipline that hosts a diversity of theories, pedagogies, and research methods, one would assume that textbooks, as part of the “disciplinary matrix,” would reflect such complexities. However, a majority of college composition/rhetoric textbooks published in the past three decades have failed to fully represent the rapidly changing and richly diverse disciplinary knowledge or to translate successfully the various theories and pedagogies into effective practical approaches for the teaching of writing in colleges and universities. (1999, 4)

Gale and Gale ask “How are we to account for this gap?” I believe that this important question should be examined in terms of the long-established and still-ongoing relationship between textbooks and the use of contingent labor to teach writing classes. Indeed, since the beginning, textbooks have been an important part of the story of the subordinate status of teaching labor in college composition. Textbooks have not

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2. A notable exception is the collection ReVisioning Composition Textbooks, edited by Xin Liu Gale and Frederic G. Gale. Gale and Gale (1999) note a considerable disjunction between the degree of presence that textbooks have in the field, and the degree to which they are examined in scholarly work. They found that only one CCCC panel was devoted to textbooks in the 1990s.
only been used as a means of training students, they have also been a relatively cheap and efficient means of controlling the pedagogies that are enacted in writing classes by those who don’t have professional status. The question that we have not pursued very thoroughly as a field is what is controlling textbooks and what function are they serving in the contemporary scene of writing education? In order to begin to address these questions, I will survey some of the primary critical treatments of textbooks in the field. I will then relate the results of a study that I have conducted that examines how twenty-one contingent teachers choose and use textbooks in their writing classes. This study provides a revealing, if admittedly limited, glimpse into the complicated political economic dynamics of a first-year writing program.

REQUIRED TEXTS

College composition has from the beginning been intimately connected with textbooks. As stated in the previous chapter, disciplinary histories locate a deeply established subordination of writing work to literary studies within the broader field of English studies, and that has profoundly shaped what we are now. By the turn of the twentieth century, the general content, status, and terms of labor in composition had already been established. Major writing programs were managed by an administrator, and first-year writing was already overwhelmingly taught by part-time instructors and graduate students. “Professors” primarily studied and taught literature, and composition had a firmly secondary status (Brereton 1995, 21). Significantly, a solid semiotic relationship had also been established between textbooks and writing programs. The three primary genres of textbooks—rhetorics, readers, and handbooks—were very much in use in various writing programs by 1900, and of course each carried its own philosophy of language and learning. Rhetorics, for instance, had become an integral part of the program at Harvard, where there was a clear relationship between textbook and curriculum. The course had no outside readings and centered heavily on invention and daily themes. Adams Sherman Hill’s Principles of Rhetoric (1878) was its only text, and Hill was also the head of the writing program. John C. Brereton calls Sherman Hill’s program at Harvard the “first modern composition program” (1995, 8). In contrast with Harvard, emerging programs at many other institutions, such as those at Amherst and Berkeley, did emphasize extensive reading along with writing instruction (11–12). John Franklin Genung, who taught composition at Amherst, had his own best-selling
textbook called *The Practical Elements of Rhetoric, with Illustrative Examples* (1885). That pedagogy was focused on modeling rather than invention—but as at Harvard, the textbook facilitated the programmatic vision, synchronizing administrative prerogatives with pedagogical practices for an institutionally subordinate staff of instructors. The textbook was based on a set of theoretical assumptions, but it was used as a mechanism of bureaucracy to turn that theory into day-to-day pedagogical blueprints for those who had little or no professional status or expertise.³

From the beginning, an important part of the function of the genre of writing textbooks has clearly been to help to deliver both the content and the pedagogical theory of undergraduate writing. It is important to note that these varieties of textbooks flourished in writing, but not in the other areas of English studies. Literary and critical anthologies certainly existed, and they still exist and help to create and legitimize always-contentious canonical terrains, but they don’t function in literary studies in the same way that they do in writing education. Literary anthologies typically only reproduce the primary texts themselves—that is where the areas of scholarly contention are located. In contrast, writing texts are far more prescriptive vehicles of pedagogical theory and practice, containing everything from invention exercises, model essays, and writing assignments to explicit articulations of drafting, revision strategies, readings, evaluative matrices, and source material for research. Textbooks therefore have significantly more influence on what happens in classrooms. As Bleich notes, textbooks (in contrast with other types of books) are “declarative and directive”—they are not the subject of interpretation or argument: they tell how, and they do so from a position of authority (1999, 16). Textbooks, as a directive genre, don’t expose (or invite critique of) the origins or contingencies of their own assumptions and claims. Many even articulate the type of teacher-student relationship that should be fostered in classrooms—often in the context of discussions of process. Bleich argues that the authors of textbooks actually assume their own teacherly presence in the classes: they are coequal with, or even positioned as the founding basis of, the authority wielded by teachers in the classes in which they are used (1999, 17–19).

³ A more thorough history of the writing textbook and its relationship to curriculums is not only outside the scope of this book, but one can find excellent treatments of the early history in Brereton (1995) and Kitzhaber (1990). I found Russell (1991) also a very helpful starting point for understanding the history of the textbook in relation to the introductory writing requirement.
Pointing to the distinctions between the ways that textbook authorship has been perceived, evaluated, and compensated by academic institutions, Susan Miller has argued that more explanation was needed of “the actual function of the textbook and the ways this function constrains the nature of its authorship” (155). In *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Miller asserted that three things are unlikely about textbooks: “That a textbook will contain any really idiosyncratic view of the students who use it, that it will singularly define purposes of writing in the course it serves, or that it will bring its author ‘authorial’ acclaim” (1991, 157). In a very clever argument that largely still holds fifteen years later, Miller argued that textbooks point to a paradox: they are deemed essential for the overall function of writing in English departments even as they are considered not really academically meritorious or deserving of the term “scholarly authorship.” In terms of professional valuation for tenure and promotion, they are the “bad cop” that goes into the interrogation room and does the dirty work while the “good cop” looks the other way. They also perform essential disciplinary functions for some of the reasons that Richard Ohmann pointed out in *English in America*. Textbooks are among the elements that create a stable subject for composition studies: fixing students, discourse, and the purposes of pedagogy as manageable, generalizable units. As Ohmann put it, textbooks position the student as “defined only by studenthood, not by any other attributes. He [sic] is classless, sexless though generically male, timeless. The authors [of textbooks] assume that writing is a socially neutral skill, to be applied in and after college for the general welfare” (Ohmann, quoted in Miller 1991, 156). Drawing on Ohmann, Miller points out that textbooks proceed from a view of student writing that is both monolithic and innocuous. Differences between students and educational contexts are minimized, as is the social impact of students’ writing: “These books treat the student and student writing as abstractions that will eventually have a social place, but that do not have one now” (157). They create acceptable subjectivities for the procession through higher education and into society. So even as writing may be couched in ways that make it seem empowering, the function of textbooks has been to support the project of FYC as it relates to institutional processes of conditioning, homogenization, and control—textbooks usefully distance writing and writers from the directly consequential. They help create a generic, politically innocuous middle that students from a variety of backgrounds are invited to occupy so that they might more smoothly
move through higher education—a process parallel to gentrification in times when higher education was less accessible, and now might be said to be “middle-classification” in an era in which undergraduate degrees are far more common. “Academic writing” is certainly a centerpiece of this stabilizing process. The linguistic and cultural impurities of class, race, and ethnicity are eliminated not though open contention (we all value diversity!), but by the promotion of an unproblematicized standard that omits them at the more fundamental and covert level of structure; marginal or radical ideas and nonstandard dialects are tamed by evaluative rubrics, restrictive assignments, and standardized academic modes that temper diversity and discourage risk-taking. Spellmeyer argues that the act of questioning itself, an act that is central to education, is carefully circumscribed and rendered largely innocuous by textbooks. Even as they purport to support “research writing” and “academic argumentation,” textbooks actually “suppress questioning by removing knowledge from the precarious worlds out of which it has emerged—the lab, the library, the household, the battlefield, the stage—and transporting it, now dead and sealed in wax, to a very different kind of place” (1999, 45). This is a place that is institutionally designed to be inconsequential: “The teacher is there to certify the student’s mastery of a standardized corpus of facts and an array of normative practices—practices, not incidentally, that require no real engagement on the student’s part, or on the teacher’s, for that matter.” The textbook helps make it possible for the institution to ensure that education “unfolds with regularity and decorum” (45–46).

Meanwhile, as Miller has pointed out, even as textbooks have come to serve this important socializing, homogenizing function in academia, they are also strangely not fully of academia. In terms of the ways that authorship is produced by academic institutions, textbooks are neither “authored” in the same sense that academic monographs are authored, nor do the textbooks themselves often rise to the status afforded objects of study: “Instead, we distance textbooks from normal discussions of research activity and withhold our own official and tangible rewards for them” (1991, 157). This positions the textbook author in a paradoxical position in academia that parallels the more general subordinate, contradictory institutional position of composition. English departments are typically unwilling to get rid of first-year writing, in part because there is still a pervasive belief that it is needed as an enculturation mechanism—the cheaply produced Full Time Equivalents certainly don’t detract
from its continued popularity either. However, FYC is still not usually considered quite of the work of most English departments: it is typically administered separately from the rest of the department in a writing program; it is overwhelmingly taught by non-tenure-track teachers who are socially and institutionally isolated from the tenured faculty; and it is not seen as an authentic part of the intellectual work of English studies. Those whose expertise is in rhetoric and composition are often hired to make first-year writing disappear in English departments, rather than to work to integrate it more completely into their intellectual centers.

Textbooks also help to position WPAs, writing teachers, and students in relation to each other. It was once not uncommon for WPAs to write their own textbooks and then make them mandatory in programs. They thereby located much of the professional work—work that requires making fundamental decisions about goals and method in writing pedagogy—with the administrator. Positioned as bureaucrats, teachers do a pedagogical approach rather than developing one. Many programs continue to have mandatory texts (with accompanying syllabi and support materials), a practice that accomplishes essentially the same function.

THE STUDY: THE GENRE FUNCTION OF TEXTBOOKS

This study is actually the product of an earlier study that did not work. For my earlier project, I collected fifty-seven of the best-selling FYC textbooks from three major textbook publishers. My initial goal was to determine the general philosophies of literacy and learning carried in these texts. I developed a preliminary working list of possible categories—current traditionalist, expressivist, process, multiple-literacies, postprocess, and so on. I then began reading through the texts, trying to locate what I saw within theoretical categories. What I found in the vast majority of texts made me realize that this method would not work. The overwhelming majority of textbooks were a theoretical hodgepodge, carrying assumptions about literacy and learning that were sometimes even internally contradictory. Almost all carried the characteristics of a “process” pedagogy, at least in the most superficial, linear sense of the term (i.e., they moved students through progressions from invention to final products over a series of prescriptive assignments). A “process” orientation is among the standard features listed in textbook marketing—what was once pedagogical innovation has become a market standard. Among the features of fast-capitalist business practices—especially in industries like software, entertainment, and publishing—is the development of more
market-tested content. The designs and functions of products more expertly anticipate the values of the niches to which they will be marketed. For textbooks to be economically viable, a “process” orientation is as essential as model assignments. However, under the broad banner of process, many also often incorporated elements of other philosophies, formalism for instance, that work against the fundamental assumptions of process. Textbooks that seemed to promote cultural diversity in their readings included assignments and evaluative rubrics that were clearly driven by current-traditionalist views of literacy in their writing sections. A textbook that purported to be based on inquiry-driven research writing provided preset topics and the full texts of sources for specific research papers so teachers would be able to catch plagiarists more easily.

In the process of the research I did learn much about how textbooks are generally structured, how they are marketed, and the values to which they seem to be appealing. At that point, I might have modified a list of categories based on the initial review that could have been more appropriate and fruitful in terms of analysis. However, the failed initial effort at categorization led to more interesting questions that could best be answered by different, more nuanced and situated research methods. I therefore devised a new study that expanded the scope of inquiry from the texts to the social uses of the texts. I used interviews and support materials to address the following two primary questions:

*Why do instructors choose particular textbooks?*

*What are the functions of textbooks in their writing pedagogies?*

Genre analysis seemed a good theoretical framework for the development of a deeper understanding of textbooks. Genre analysis ties texts to their contexts, enabling an understanding of not just the typical forms of texts but their social functions. Carolyn Miller’s “Genre as Social Action” (1984) and the English translation of Bakhtin helped mark the beginning of the contemporary discussion of genre in rhetoric and composition in the early- to mid-1980s. Previous work with genre had focused almost exclusively on textual conventions—for instance, the standard sections of a research essay or the rhyming schemes of particular poetic forms. This new work expanded the focus of genre analysis from general textual features to the way that communications are typically carried out within their particular ecologies. Genre analysis is no longer a means of classifying texts according to specific features—it is a
means of understanding how textual forms shape communications and social relations in specific settings. As Carolyn Miller argued, genre is a means of taking action in specific social contexts. As such, genres shape and are shaped by the cultures in which they are situated (151–65).

This conception of genre spawned a still-expanding body of research that examines the complex relationships between texts and their contexts. Genre is researched as an aspect of social relationships among authors and audiences, institutional hierarchies, actions in work environments, situated professional discourses, and individual and collective agency (see, e.g., Bawarshi 2003; Bazerman 1997; Beebee 1994; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Devitt 2004; Diaz et al. 1999; Freedman and Medway 1994; Russell 1991). Texts respond to social situations and initiate future responses. Genres are therefore often not only regulative of texts, they help to create the frameworks of human activities and social orders. Referencing Foucault’s “the author function,” Anis Bawarshi describes this socializing aspect of certain texts as “the genre function.” Texts structure activities and behaviors in ways that define the status quo. Genres are therefore among the artifacts of everyday social life that condition identities and structure social relations.

Genres are also historical and resonate with the histories of their contexts. Charles Bazerman points out how “the emergence of genre goes hand in hand with the emergence of generic situations, with the rhetorical action itself helping to define the situation” (1997, 6–7). Products of exigence, they form as innovative, active responses to situations in particular places and times, and they evolve with the evolution of those situations. Wonderful examples of this process of emergence and evolution can be found in Joanne Yates’s work with organizational communication. Yates describes how communication systems were developed by businesses with the rise of industrialization. As the operations of businesses became larger and more geographically dispersed, managers found that existing ad hoc approaches to management were inadequate for controlling complex organizations. They were too varied, too reliant on the expertise of particular individuals, and too subject to misinterpretation. Moreover, there were no regular mechanisms for enacting managerial imperatives quickly and efficiently across the various levels and locations of large organizations. Practices that came to be called systemic management were developed in response to these challenges. Communications infrastructures created within managed systems became highly effective tools for the rationalization of operations.
Important organizational genres emerged within these communications infrastructures. These are the texts that are so ubiquitous in organizational settings today that we take their forms for granted—standardized memos, handbooks, training manuals, procedural outlines, checklists, and progress reports.

This study examines how the genre of the writing textbook has similarly evolved to respond to the terms of labor in composition. My choice of methods has benefits and drawbacks. I conducted interviews with twenty-one participants, all of whom teach at the same institution. I also collected various types of documents from these participants (interviews and documents are described below). This research is therefore very limited in scope. A survey conducted among faculty from a large sampling of institutions could have enabled me to make more confident claims of typification. This research was conducted at a university of a particular type, and might not be relevant for other types of institutions—for instance, at small liberal arts institutions that don’t experience high turnover, or at institutions that have a very different curricular focus and approach to professional development. However, the sacrifice in scope came with a degree of increase in depth. Conducting lengthy interviews with faculty chosen for their distinctions in rank and experience, doing follow-ups with selected participants, and drawing on secondary materials enabled me to identify salient issues and examine them more fully. Moreover, that all of the participants worked in the same institution enabled me to examine how textbooks function within a particular workplace culture.

**Participant Profile**

The primary factors in my choice of participants were number of years experience teaching postsecondary writing and institutional rank. Consistent with the national profile of postsecondary writing teachers, the staff at the site of this study was primarily female and overwhelmingly white, and the participants in the study reflected the staff’s general ratio. Only one of the twenty-one participants in this study was nonwhite, and only three were male. Participation was voluntary. A total of twenty-four teachers were contacted and three declined to participate—all three cited the busyness of their schedules.

**Experience**

The range of experience of participants was from one to thirteen years (see table 1). Some already had worked in other careers in a wide
range of other professions—from journalism to real estate—before teaching. Some also had experience teaching in primary and secondary grades. As is consistent with national figures, teachers at this institution tend not to have long careers at the contingent level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Experience</th>
<th>1–3</th>
<th>4–8</th>
<th>9–13</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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*Table 1: Years of Experience of Participants*

**Rank**

Four of the participants were teaching assistants (TAs). Seven were part-time lecturers (PTLs) who are paid per-class and contracted by semester as needed. Ten were full-time non-tenure-track lecturers (FTNTTL) who are salaried and on multiple-year renewable contracts (see table 2). PTLs have no benefits; FTNTTLs do have benefits, including state-sponsored health insurance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>TAs</th>
<th>PTLs</th>
<th>FTNTTLs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
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*Table 2: Rank of Participants*

With a few exceptions, FTNTTLs tended to be those with the most experience. All PTLs had less than eight years of experience and all TAs had less than three years of experience.

**Interviews**

I conducted twenty-one initial interviews and six follow-up interviews with selected participants. This yielded 203 pages of transcription. The initial interviews were semistructured (see Appendix A). A standard list of questions was used for each round; however, in each interview I also adjusted depending on what teachers said (Patton 1990; Rubin and Rubin 1995). The interview questions were designed to elicit information concerning the research questions, but I also pursued new themes
through open-ended and follow-up questions. Moreover, sometimes it was necessary to deviate from a particular set of questions to make participants more comfortable and interviews more conversational. The follow-up interviews were conducted to verify analysis and discuss—and in some instances significantly complicate and bring about a more nuanced understanding of—the responses of selected participants. For instance, cost was a surprisingly important theme that emerged in the interviews. As the results section below will indicate, it is not only a significant factor in why teachers choose certain textbooks, it also affects pedagogical decisions. Once I identified cost as an important theme, discussing it with selected participants helped me to gain a deeper understanding of why it is such a widespread concern. In follow-ups, participants discussed at more length how they believe textbook cost is connected to student evaluations, and also how they relate cost to their own experiences as students. In order to enable me to make more consistent comparisons, I asked the teachers to focus mainly on the second course in the two-course FYC sequence—a course that focuses on argumentation and academic writing. All of the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded according to the procedures described in “Transcription and Analysis” below.

**Documents**

I initially asked participants only to submit syllabi. However, participants volunteered other documents that they felt would be relevant to our discussions of how textbooks functioned in their writing classes. In a number of instances I asked participants to submit additional materials because they were explicitly mentioned (or relevant to discussions) in interviews. I used these documents to verify or complicate statements. For example, when a participant told me that she used the exact assignment sequence offered by her textbook, I was not only able to see this in her syllabus, I was also able to see that she followed the chapters of the textbook in their original sequence as well. Another participant indicated that she didn’t feel compelled to cover the textbook in her class, but a later check of her syllabus indicated that almost the entire textbook was, in fact, slated to be covered. When I subsequently asked her about this, she said that she listed so much of the textbook as required reading on the initial syllabus as a goal and then made adjustments as the semester progressed. She believed that this helped her credibility with her students because they saw that she “at least intended” to cover most
of the textbook and therefore had not asked them to buy a text that that they did not need. As you will see below, this concern with cost and students’ perceptions of whether the textbook purchase was worthwhile was a salient theme in the interviews.

**Transcription and Analysis**

All recordings were transcribed verbatim. Consistent with an approach to data collection and analysis that has been termed “inquiry-guided” (Mishler 1990), “reflexive” (Atkinson 1990; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), and “dialectical” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), data analysis was a recursive process. I recognized that the biases and preconceptions that I brought into the project affected its design and my analysis. This reflexive approach was designed to foster more awareness of these preconceptions and enable my conception of the direction of the project, research questions, and methods to evolve. I wanted to recognize and value the participants’ voices and knowledge, and to let the data suggest its own analytical possibilities as much as possible. The process was designed to enable me to question some of my initial assumptions, pursue alternative research questions, and develop new interpretive strategies. I asked open-ended questions in the interviews; when a working list of categories and subcategories was developed from an initial analysis, I discussed them with participants. This helped me to understand their relative importance and gain new insights on exactly how or why they were important.

After initial analysis of the documents in light of what I had discovered with selected participants, I refined the working list of categories and developed a list of corresponding codes. When the coding scheme worked satisfactorily, I coded the interview transcripts. I then further refined the coding scheme with a second reader through selective coding. I developed a final list of codes with definitions as a result of this process (see Appendix B). When data was organized according to the codes, it was linked and analyzed with other documents collected for the study (syllabi, curriculum support materials, assessment rubrics, etc.).

**PRIMARY CATEGORIES**

The research not only revealed a number of surprising, important aspects of textbook use among its participants, it also provided a glimpse into the thinking, professional dispositions, and pedagogical practices of non-tenure-track writing faculty at the institution. I will share the
results generated by three general analytical categories: identification, reasons for choosing texts, and authority. In the discussion section that follows, I will elaborate on why I think these particular categories are important and what the research might suggest about the function of textbooks and postsecondary writing at similar sites: medium-to-large public universities that rely heavily on non-tenure-track teachers with little formal training in rhetoric and composition to teach FYC.

**Identification**

Participants’ professional identifications and theoretical orientations were important aspects of this study for a number of reasons. The specific path of inquiry I adopted sought to correlate certain behaviors with texts with people’s occupational identities, their years of experience, and their status at the university. On a somewhat deeper level, I wanted to understand more about the degree to which textbooks supplied (rather than conformed to) theoretical orientations, and how they functioned in terms of the teacher’s authority.

For instance, I anticipated that textbook choices might intersect with identification in these two different scenarios:

**Scenario One:** A teacher has a developed and informed theoretical identification. A tenure-track teacher with considerable graduate study in rhetoric and composition, she has had ample opportunity to think through her pedagogical goals, the assumptions (theories) about literacy and learning that guide her pedagogy, and the ways that her specific methods (assignments, workshops, etc.) relate to those assumptions. This critical faculty has been developed through many of the processes that mark advanced study and enculturation into a scholarly discipline: extensive coursework, relationships with mentors, her own research, attendance at professional conferences in the field, etc. She most likely approaches textbooks as . . .

**Scenario Two:** A teacher has just been hired to teach an introductory writing course as a part-time instructor. She had taught writing at a different institution as a teaching assistant five years earlier. She had one class that focused on teaching writing at that other institution. She has not developed a professional identity as a scholar, and she is not conversant in the scholarly discourse of any discipline—including rhetoric and composition. Moreover, the goals for first-year writing at the institution at which she will be teaching are quite different from where she was in the past. She most likely approaches textbooks as . . .
In the first scenario, one would expect the teacher to approach her textbook choice with an A > B relationship with theory = A and textbook = B. She has an established professional identity and expertise, and a defined and informed (if evolving) theoretical orientation: she will likely seek a textbook that is at least reasonably consistent with that expertise and orientation. In the second scenario, the teacher doesn’t have an established professional or disciplinary identity or expertise, and she has never had the opportunity to develop an informed theoretical orientation in writing pedagogy. Therefore, one might expect her to approach the textbook choice with more like an A < B relationship. In the absence of an established and confidently wielded set of assumptions about literacy and learning, the textbook will likely be relied upon as much to supply as to meet a theory of pedagogy. The textbook choice would therefore rely more on factors other than the theory that seems to be driving the book.

None of the participants had an advanced degree in rhetoric and composition, and few had formal background in the field. Two were enrolled in Ph.D. programs at other institutions, but both were pursuing degrees in literary concentrations. Most had taken a course on teaching college writing of the type that is usually required for TAs at various institutions. However, few had taken courses in rhetoric and composition other than a required course for incoming TAs. In short, participants didn’t self-identify within the scholarly discipline of rhetoric and composition: none had extensive graduate education in the field, and none did regular research or published in the field. When asked how they self-identify as professionals, the most common answer was as “teacher,” “lecturer,” or “college instructor.” Their occupational identities were primarily tied to teaching, rather than to scholarship or to expertise in an academic discipline.

Significantly, the three participants who did not self-identify in this way were the two who were already in Ph.D. programs, and a third who had been accepted into a Ph.D. program and would begin the following year. The participant who was farthest along in her program—she had completed her coursework and had worked on her dissertation for several years—answered “When I talk to people I usually talk about my dissertation and my field [a literary specialization].” The other Ph.D. candidate, and the graduate student who would begin study in the fall, both self-identified as graduate students rather than as teachers. The numbers here are, of course, much too small to make any generalizations. However, the differences in the answers does point to the
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possibility that advanced graduate study tends to move people’s identities away from the immediacy of teaching work at a specific locale and more toward “graduate student” and then “scholarly” identities that are associated with Ph.D. work in academic disciplines. In the lexicon established in the previous chapter, people move from a more “bureaucratic” identity to a more “professional” identity.

When participants were asked to explain their own general assumptions about literacy and learning in terms of particular pedagogical movements, philosophies, scholarship, or scholars, the responses were generally vague and in a few cases even somewhat defensive. The only scholars mentioned were those who are perhaps most strongly associated with the proliferation of process in the 1970s and 1980s and have subsequently been canonized in process-oriented textbooks: (early) Elbow, Murray, and Moffett. One experienced FTNTTL who had pursued readings in the field on his own was a notable exception, and also mentioned Bizzell, Bruffee, and Burke. The only pedagogical philosophy explicitly mentioned by participants was “process.” In nearly every interview, the discussions of professional identification and educational background quickly moved past “scholarly” discussion and toward discussions of particular practices and particular teachers and colleagues. Assertions of expertise were therefore “local”: associated with teaching practice and policies—the concrete material conditions—at this particular site.

Consider, for instance, the following responses to the prompt: “Describe your general teaching and learning philosophy.” This was followed-up with “What research or theory has shaped it? Can you identify yourself with any particular theories, scholars, or theoretical trends?” A PTL who had taught for six years responded to this question about theoretical orientation with a discussion of her goals as they relate to her practice:

1. I want them to have skills . .
2. to not just sort of leave my class and the university
3. with this isolated body of knowledge . .
4. that is not really going to serve them when they get out . .
5. so we do a lot of work with learning grammar skills
6. learning how to write in a coherent way
7. with a focus on what job are you going to go into . .
8. so that is my main goal
9. that they leave with the skills that they are going to need to survive
10. no matter what job they are going into.4

Among participating teachers more generally, professional identification was much more based on teaching practices than on scholarly conceptions or associations, and therefore more practice-centered than “scholarly.” They were generally more comfortable when talking about what they do when teaching than explaining why they do what they do. And when they explained why, the “why” was connected to a “real world” knowledge, which is where some participants seemed to be founding their expertise. The positioning of “real world” expertise in opposition to scholarly expertise, along with the quick turn away from more abstract scholarly discourse and toward the particulars of practice, carried an at least implicit rejection of what one might call “academic frivolity.” Certainly in this response, there is heavy emphasis on “skills” you “need to survive” (5, 9) rather on other possible elements of writing pedagogy that she calls “isolated . . . knowledge” that are not relevant outside of the university (3, 4). A “real world” ethos for a teacher who isn’t fluent in a scholarly discourse locates a philosophy of literacy that is based on applicable workplace skills. Its projected opposite is a scholarly, theoretical orientation that is diminished by its detachment from the immediate, everyday realities of economic survival.

When asked about philosophy of teaching and learning, some explicitly described the difficulty that they had explaining their philosophies. The less-experienced teachers generally said that they were still in the process of learning. More experienced teachers indicated that they know what they are doing, but they are not very good at explaining it in what one participant called “academic lingo.” In this program, FTNTTLs are asked to write a teaching philosophy as part of their evaluation process. Several PTLs also mentioned having drafted statements as a part of the required materials to be submitted for consideration for a full-time contract, but they are not requested to do so otherwise. Five participants

4. In the transcription, utterances are broken into units. The only symbol that I use is ( . . ) which connotes a significant pause. After the introduction of a segment of transcription, I reference particular lines using line numbers.
mentioned the drafting of this statement when asked about their teaching philosophies. Again, none of the participants had much graduate training in rhetoric and composition and none self-identified within the field. It is possible that the drafting of that philosophy statement is for many teachers the only extended time they devote to reflecting upon and articulating their general theoretical orientations (and the assumptions that drive what they are doing) toward the teaching of writing. When the subject of these teaching statements came up, I asked follow-up questions because I felt that this line of discussion could help to illuminate important aspects of professional identification. The transcripts made it clear that teaching philosophies aren’t developed by these participants in extensive dialectic with the scholarship and vocabulary of rhetoric and composition. Drafting these statements therefore seems very awkward, if not troubling, for many of these teachers and points to a clash between two mind-sets that are figured quite differently—the mind-set of a professional academic with a Ph.D. who is conditioned to value a praxis that is shaped through professional dialectic, and the mind-set of a contingent teacher who values applied experience more highly and doesn’t see scholarship as very significant to the teaching of writing. One teacher, for instance, indicated that she had

1. spent close to a month
2. the first time I tried to write a teaching and learning philosophy
3. and now I need to redo it . .
4. so it is one of the hardest things
5. to put down on paper
6. or even put into words

Missing is a conceptual vocabulary that enables articulation and perhaps clarity concerning one’s aims and orientations. This difficulty with articulating a teaching philosophy at least parallels the hodgepodge of philosophies that can be found in so many textbooks. When asked in a follow-up if the general philosophy of the textbook she uses is consistent with her own, she responded,

1. I pick it mostly for content
2. over what philosophy is coming through
When asked to explain the difference between “content” and “philosophy,” she mentioned the features of textbooks—assignments, readings, and exercises—“what the text does for a class” rather than the assumptions that inform the text. Again, the somewhat emphatically stated preference of “content” over “philosophy” carries the implicit suggestion that underlying assumptions and research concerning literacy and learning are not an important consideration when it comes to pedagogy. Theory is contained within academic discourse rather than employed as pedagogical praxis.

Bruce Horner has examined the long association of basic writing with the teaching of “skills.” He calls this “practical bent” “problematic,” citing Raymond Williams critique of “the practical.” Williams locates an element of impatience and willful blindness in the reliance on the practical: “‘Let’s be realistic’ probably more often means ‘let us accept the limits of this situation’ ([limits] meaning hard facts, often of power or money in their existing and established forms)” (Williams, quoted in Horner and Lu 1999, 20). Horner links this to a similar association of impatience with “lore” made by Stephen North. North describes the “habit forming” tendency among those who subscribe to a “bedrock pragmatism” to “become habitually impatient with complicated causal analyses, which in turn makes [practitioners] relatively cavalier about such analyses even for the purposes of inquiry” (North 1987, 40). Textbooks might be said to function as a means of providing a kind of external authorization for practices and assumptions that don’t rise above the level of lore. Their directive, authoritative nature might justify a lack of investment in inquiry and the thoughtful, informed interrogation of one’s pedagogy.

A little more surprising was how much even experienced teachers relied on textbooks to supply direction for courses over time—well beyond those initial, uncertain years. Going into the study, I expected to find that teachers would rely heavily on a textbook or textbooks early in their careers, but then gradually adopt a more individualized approach as they became more experienced. Among those who had been teaching longer, I expected to see more experimentation and a diminished role for the textbook. However, teachers with three years of experience or less were actually more apt to change textbooks than those who had been teaching longer, and there was little significant difference in how heavily teachers relied on texts to structure their courses over time. Of the eleven instructors who had four or more years of experience, eight reported that they had used their current textbooks for at least four
years. They find a textbook that they like and then stick to it, year after year. I came to think of this as “imprinting.” Finding something that they feel works well is important. They not only don’t want to change, the terms of labor for contingent teachers (high numbers of sections that tend to be full, the maintenance of part-time jobs in addition to teaching) create a disincentive to make significant changes. Participants did indicate that they make tactical changes to their courses over time. However, those changes might be said to “continue downstream” from the text, rather than being made because of more strategic evolutions in perceptions of teaching, language, or learning: evolutions of the type that are fostered by professional development activities like reading scholarship, attending presentations, or participating in discussions at conferences or workshops. Instructors alter the way that they use the textbooks, but the essential structure and philosophies of the textbook continue to substantially drive what they do in the classroom.

One instructor, for example, indicated that she had used the same textbook for the entire eleven years that she had been teaching. She entered the program when it was switching its general orientation away from writing about literature and toward argumentation. At that time she chose this particular argument-focused textbook. It matched well with the curriculum—it had been among the list of texts recommended by the writing program director at that time—and the author had came to the department a number of times over the years that the instructor had used the textbook to talk about how to use it and get feedback for future editions. The textbook author

1. spoke to us and gave us seminars
2. and I started using it because she had a manual with it . .
3. and see what I did
4. and a lot of us did
5. was follow the manual
6. she [the textbook author] had it in an 8½ by 11 [format]
7. so you could just tear out the worksheets
8. and copy them and use them . .
9. so initially . .
10. because we were so new to it all
11. I just saluted and followed her examples every semester
12. and it helped a great deal . .
13. it took several semesters
14. and maybe two or three years
15. until I was comfortable with it . .
16. and um . .
17. I had made up some things on my own to use
18. rather than to follow
19. but it was based on that

The pattern described here was common across participants. Nearly all of those who had taught for four or more years reported that once they found a textbook that they liked, they didn’t move away from it; and the individual innovations that they developed over time are built on the same structure and guiding assumptions offered in the textbook (15–19). The textbook supplied the initial framework for the pedagogy, and the essential framework has remained unaltered. Among the participants, finding a textbook that one likes is tantamount to finding a teaching philosophy that one favors; and once a particular path is taken, it isn’t likely to be substantially changed.

Below, I provide an extended portion from an interview with another teacher who had been teaching for seven years and who also chose a text during his first year and then never changed. It shows the long-term impact imprinting with a textbook can have on a teacher’s pedagogical orientation and practice. This instructor uses the same textbook as his colleague cited above, and also mentioned the author’s visits to the department as important to his choice. When asked about the theory that drives the book, he responded with “process,” which he described as a deliberate, linear progression through assignments. He then moved on to a more in-depth description of the initial process of textbook choice.

Instructor:

1. The theory that I think drives the book . .
2. well first of all
3. writing as a process
4. they definitely have that
5. and really
6. they take that and apply it to the various steps of the assignments . .
7. and [the textbook author] gives a very detailed instructor’s manual
8. which was another reason I didn’t mention why we chose this text
9. because we had never taught the course before
10. and had no clue what we were doing
11. and the fact that it came with
12. that very, very detailed instructor’s manual helped a lot . .
13. of course, a lot of it we figured out later wasn’t so great
14. but at the time it was a lifesaver to see how to structure the course

TS:

1. I can understand how an instructor’s manual is helpful
2. when you first begin to teach a class . .
3. can you talk about what happens after that . .
4. when you have had some experience with a class?

Instructor:

1. Yeah . .
2. I don’t know how specific you want me to get
3. but I will give you an example
4. [The textbook author] in the instructor’s manual
5. breaks down a course into its two components
6. you have the first position paper
7. and then you have a second position paper . .
8. I did that for two semesters I think
9. and it was just completely redundant
10. I got comments from students . .
11. like repetitive assignments . .
12. things like that . .
13. I couldn’t argue
14. I agreed with them
15. so I changed that
16. I guess there was over-teaching material . .
17. the students would pick up what they were doing in one class
18. or sometimes two classes
19. but [the textbook author] would overdo it
20. and there was just too much time spent on certain things

TS:

1. So the text is a class by class blueprint?

Instructor:

1. Yeah
2. yes it is
3. oh yes, day by day
4. she breaks it down
5. there are sample syllabi in there
6. and she breaks down each day . .
7. this is for a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule
8. or a two-day schedule
9. but she has everything in there . .
10. the framework
11. if you look at the syllabus
12. is still there
13. and it is different too
14. pedagogically speaking
He went on to explain that the book has two assignment sequences that are exactly the same. The book sets up a research paper and then moves students through it, providing the necessary sources for the research in the back of the book. He indicated that he thought this was useful because it “controls plagiarism.” It then moves students through a second project that is very similar. Because of the repetition, the instructor changed the second assignment. He uses another reading from the book as a model. However, the students now have to, on their own, find an argument that they disagree with and respond in a letter form with cited support for their arguments. This requires them to use sources outside of the book, but the book still serves as primary support:

1. All of this argument theory [explicated in the textbook]
2. you can find it in the essay [the one he assigns]
3. there is a Rogerian argument
4. it wouldn’t have existed at the time
5. but still there are Rogerian aspects in there . .
6. it makes it much more fun
7. it is still a two-component thing
8. only I think it is much more productive

This instructor has initially adopted the exact model offered by the book. He has then gradually deviated. That deviation has been a response to dissatisfaction with some redundancy in the textbook’s sequence (26–33). It has therefore been based on practical experiences with the way the book deploys its pedagogy. The adjustments are tactical efforts to find better, more creative, and interesting ways to implement the philosophy and goals that are already driving the text (49–56). As the instructor points out, his syllabus does still show a heavy reliance on the text. The same basic chapter by chapter sequence is still there throughout the term (45–46). There is just some deviation in how the second major writing assignment is approached.

It is also significant that the instructor referred to the author of the textbook either by last name or with a pronoun—rather than giving the title of the textbook or simply calling it “the text.” This was common among participants. In spite of the fact that instructors in this program have some latitude concerning the text that they can choose to use,
fifteen of the twenty-one participants use the same text. I explore some of the stated reasons why this is the case below, but here I want to point out that these interviews complicate what Susan Miller argued about the lack of authorial status for textbook authors. Certainly, as Foucault famously describes it in “The Author Function,” authorship isn’t an objective description of the material act of writing texts: it is, rather, a socially conferred status that rests on a host of implicit value judgments. Authorship is conferred differently in different discourses and social contexts and it functions differently in those strata. In the professional, scholarly strata of academia, my strong feeling is that textbooks still don’t offer the same authorial status as the authoring of a scholarly monograph. However, in the realm of FYC, textbook authorship is far more highly regarded—possibly even more than the authorship of scholarship. The author of this popular textbook was cited by name throughout these interviews and clearly has “authorial” status among these instructors—most of whom weren’t able to name many, if any, active scholars in rhetoric and composition. Indeed, in practice, the authority of textbook authors can be quite profound, as the directive nature of the genre enables them to substantially “author” the classes in which they are used. That said, the author’s status isn’t scholarly in the sense that she is expected to make persuasive arguments based on primary and secondary sources. What then, is expected of her? What are instructors looking for when they choose texts?

**Reasons for Choosing Texts**

During the interviews, I asked teachers to talk through their decision making processes when choosing texts for a particular course. As they mentioned specific factors, they were often asked to elaborate. The object of this line of questions was to get as complete a portrait as possible of the spectrum of factors that writing instructors consider when they choose their textbooks. During analysis, these factors were categorized, and then counted for frequency of mention across all of the interviews. Eight categories of criteria were mentioned by at least five participants: cost, support/validation, quality/usefulness of assignments and sequence, quality/usefulness of readings, accessibility, compactness, textual features, and quality/usefulness of instructor’s manual. The frequency is summarized in the chart below (table 3).
Table 3: Most Frequently Mentioned Criteria for Choosing Textbooks

In the following, I elaborate on the first five (all of which were mentioned by eleven or more participants). Discussions of these categories will touch on other themes identified in the analysis.

**Cost**

Overwhelmingly, cost was the most frequently mentioned criteria for choosing texts. Instructors saw keeping book costs low for students as a significant priority that trumped many other concerns. During interviews, many volunteered the precise costs of their textbooks—one instructor even said that a primary reason that she chose a particular textbook was because it could be found used online at various sites for five dollars.

Obviously, the desire to buy an affordably priced textbook is driven by a concern for the finances of students. This is a concern that many of us share. A factor that was rather surprising for its frequency of mention, however, was a personal identification with the financial burdens of students. For some, this identification was directly related to the instructor’s memories of their own undergraduate experiences. The interviews were conducted at an institution that serves large numbers of nontraditional students. Moreover, many of the instructors themselves were either graduates of this university or similar institutions that John Alberti (2001) calls “second-tier, working class universities.”

5. I cite Alberti here because he is careful not to diminish the value of the quality of
They therefore empathized with the financial struggles of many of their students. For instance, one instructor who self-identified as a first-generation college student volunteered

1. My very first semester of college
2. my textbooks cost six hundred dollars
3. and my family and I were not prepared for it
4. we didn’t know
5. so that surprise cost shaped me as a student
6. and sort of shaped the way that I looked at textbooks as a teacher

A TA similarly said

1. All throughout undergrad . .
2. I put myself through undergrad
3. and I was always looking for the cheapest price
4. so I always
5. before I choose a textbook . .
6. I look on the Internet
7. to see how much you can get for it when you sell it back

These instructors consider cost very important and they relate that concern to a personal identification with their financial struggles. At least for some, the concern with cost is clearly related to the fact that they are currently enrolled as graduate students in institutions, or they were recently undergraduates themselves. This describes eight of the participants: four were TAs enrolled in the university’s graduate program, two others were also enrolled in M.A. programs and teaching as adjuncts, and two were enrolled in Ph.D. programs and teaching as adjuncts. Some of these instructors volunteered that their own ongoing book costs help them to be more conscious of how much their students are spending.

There is an undercurrent to this empathy that relates to the institutional identification issues discussed above—institutional status education or the students at these institutions.
somewhat parallels an identification within an economic class. The tone in which many participants discussed cost suggested that they didn’t feel that cost was a common concern among tenure-track faculty at the university. The “real world” versus “academic” distinction in ethos described above was associated with the ability to empathize with the financial situations of students. Professional worth among “teachers” is not only linked to a devotion to the everyday work of teaching—constructed as distinct from scholarly activity—but also to an ability to empathize with the “real world” challenges faced by students.

An important, somewhat surprising, theme that repeatedly emerged in discussions of cost was the widespread compulsion to cover as much of the material in the textbooks as possible. A part of this compulsion stemmed from a very straightforward cost/benefit logic. The feeling was that if students were being required to buy a textbook, the textbook needed to be used as much as possible. This seemed a powerful motivator for many instructors to include as much of the textbooks as possible in their syllabi—from day-to-day units to assignments and readings. Driving this compulsion was a concern about what students were going to think about the instructor’s overall judgment and concern for their welfare, and then subsequently write in their course evaluations. Concerns linked to student evaluations were tied to the need to justify the purchase of the textbook through extensive coverage. Consider the response of a FTNTTL when she was asked why she had recently decided to change textbooks.

1. I got a less expensive book
2. because I remember what it was like being a student
3. and when I found out how much it cost
4. whew . .
5. the first semester I didn’t even think about it
6. and I just thought
7. I have all of these wonderful ideas
8. and then I got this book
9. and I didn’t even think about the cost . .
10. and then during the first week of class
11. you hear students mumbling and talking
12. and it was fifty something dollars
13. and I had no idea
14. but it was my fault
15. my lack of knowledge
16. then I . .
17. felt that I needed to squeeze every bit out of that textbook

Interestingly, this instructor reports initially having “wonderful ideas” about what she was going to do in the classroom prior to choosing the book (7–8). However, the cost of the book caused her to switch to heavier usage of the book, and away from her own ideas (16–17). Her “lack of knowledge” (15) was experiential—she didn’t know that students would grumble about textbook costs, and that was important enough to her to change the way that she approached the structure of the course in order to justify the cost. Another instructor more blatantly made it clear that she believed that the purchase should drive virtually every aspect of the class in order to be justified:

1. If you are going to ask a student to buy a textbook
2. in a lower-level writing class
3. you should use that textbook . .
4. it should be a part of your everyday discussions
5. it should be a part of your weekly readings
6. they should go to those books for assignments . .
7. there is nothing worse
8. that will kill morale in your class
9. than for your teacher to ask you to buy a two-hundred dollar book
10. that you never use . .
11. so weekly
12. daily
13. they have to have their books out on their desks
14. they are doing exercises
they are reading probably 75 percent of the text

Again, negative student responses to textbook costs (8–10) leads to more cohesion—in this case far more cohesion—with the specific approach followed in the text. Whether the textbook actually merited this level of focus in terms of how it supports teaching and learning seems marginal: “morale” (8) is substantially built on whether the students feel that a textbook is being used enough to merit its purchase. Similar statements were made with remarkable frequency in the interviews. One instructor described a panicked episode in which she went to the bookstore and found that the textbook she had required came bundled with additional reading materials that she had not ordered. The panic didn’t come from a higher cost; the cost was no different with the bundled materials than it had been without. They were nominally “free”—add-ons provided by the publishers.6 However, this instructor felt compelled to add some of the bundled readings onto her syllabus as the course progressed because she was afraid that students would feel that they had paid unnecessarily for them.

Certainly the high level of concern for student evaluations is related to the contingent job status of these teachers, and therefore shapes pedagogical decisions. PTLs are evaluated exclusively based upon student evaluations. Simply put, low evaluations could mean fewer or no classes for the next term. FTNTTLs do undergo more extensive review in this program, but student evaluations are also heavily weighted in those reviews. Arguably, high student evaluations are the best means of maintaining secure employment.

Support/Validation

The second most frequently mentioned factor shaping instructors’ textbook choices was support/validation. “Support” references instructors’ tendency to choose textbooks that others in the program have also chosen because they can then build classes that more closely resemble their colleagues’ courses. “Validation,” which is certainly related, references their desire to build classes that are founded on some external authority and are adequately consistent with programmatic goals. While this program allows instructors to choose their textbooks, the choices

6. Readings and additional materials are bundled with books as a bonus to compel instructors to choose particular texts, and also to field-test new materials for possible inclusion in new editions.
are shaped by a number of factors mentioned by instructors:

- In a class that is mandatory for all incoming TAs, students are asked to evaluate a number of recommended textbooks, and those textbooks are then often chosen by those students for the classes they teach.

- Representatives from two very large textbook publishers are particularly active in this department, and most of the participants have chosen textbooks offered by one of these two publishers.

- There is a clear synergy between the general philosophy and goals promoted within this program—in the TA class, programmatic workshops, and so on—and a few specific textbooks that approach argumentation as a formalistic academic mode.

Even given these factors, it was nevertheless surprising that fifteen of the twenty-one participants chose to use the same textbook from the multitudes of argument textbooks that are currently available. The interviews indicate that an important reason for this choice was that instructors wanted to work among others who are using the same textbook because it creates a common reference point for informal, “watercooler” discussions of day-to-day pedagogy. Participants mentioned the value of being able to discuss particular challenges with other instructors. Some even mentioned the value of having a common set of assignments and grading rubrics.

In addition to the common ground created by the use of a common textbook, however, validation was a persistent theme in these discussions. As one teacher phrased it, choosing a textbook that others in the program had chosen assures her that she is not “coming from left field” with her assignments and general approach. In contrast, a TA in her first year as a teacher said that she had worried when making her choice because the book she had chosen to use “is not on the recommended list; and I think as a teaching assistant you are a little nervous to branch out.” However, she decided to use the book anyway because another TA had also decided to use it, and “having another teaching assistant choosing it too sort of validated my using it.”

Another way of seeing the validating function of the textbook is that

7. The program does have a recommended text list. However, it also enables teachers to choose their own texts, so the recommended list doesn’t seem to be exclusive.
it helps instructors to feel more certain that they are conforming to the
general philosophy and goals promoted in this particular program—
even if they don’t necessarily agree with the philosophy. Using the text-
book that so many others are using assures them that they are not going
to be too far outside of the program’s philosophy, as it is both explicitly
and implicitly articulated. One PTL said that

1. The main thing is . .
2. and I don’t even know if this is true
3. but I was told that we were required to teach the Toulmin model
   of argument
4. so I don’t really like that model of argument
5. but it is outlined in [textbook author] clearly . .
6. so I use it [that text]

Several others said that they were unsure of what textbook to choose,
but this particular textbook seemed to be “everywhere” in the pro-
gram—on common bookshelves, on recommended lists provided by the
program director, and of course the author herself visiting the program
to promote the book. This gave them a sense of comfort that using this
text would help to ensure that they were, as a PTL phrased it, “on the
right track.”

In *The Social Construction of Reality* Peter Berger and Thomas
Luckmann described the relationship between organizations and the
creation of localized knowledges that come to be seen as “objective”:

In the course of the division of labor a body of knowledge is developed that
refers to the particular activities involved. In its linguistic basis, this knowl-
edge is already indispensable to the institutional “programming” of these
economic activities. . . . This knowledge serves as a channeling, controlling
force in itself, an indispensable ingredient of the institutionalization of this
area of conduct. . . . A whole segment of the social world is objectified by this
knowledge. (1967, 66)

Berger and Luckmann distinguish this type of knowledge from that
which might be developed within a disciplinary apparatus, and thus
subject to rigorous critique and capable of “subsequently becom[ing]
系统atically organized as a body of knowledge.” Rather, the social con-
struction of this knowledge is much more localized. To a certain extent,
the choice of a common textbook creates cultural commonality and the seemingly “objective” knowledge that predominates within a specific locale. This is an important distinction that extends from differences in status and professional training. There is an appeal to a consensus with the choice of a common textbook, but that consensus is exclusively local. While someone who has been professionalized within the field might reference a scholarly consensus or her own informed sense of judgment, at this more bureaucratic level teachers were concerned with programmatic norms and requirements. This highlights how the political economy of FYC makes pedagogy and students’ writing much more subject to coercion.

Assignments and Sequence

Eleven instructors volunteered sequence as a significant factor in their favoring a specific text. Consideration of sequence was typically tied to discussions of “the writing process.” I put writing process in quotations because this term was used in a very general sense. A “writing process” approach was contrasted with an approach in which students don’t do any drafting or revision, and merely turn in a final product—or with an approach that has assignments that don’t follow any progressive sequence. Moreover, a number of teachers when discussing their general philosophy spoke of “the” writing process as though it were a singular progression that everyone follows. Many textbooks are structured in a manner that seems to encourage this thinking with linear “process” progressions: invention exercises, then exercises for structuring an essay, then outlines and checklists for revision. As one teacher put it, she liked the way that her text presents “the writing process” because

1. they have a progression in which they take a huge paper...
2. like a position paper
3. and break it down into little parts
4. like initial proposal and exploratory paper and all of that

Indeed, in addition to being a pedagogical technique and philosophy, process seems to adopt the status of content itself. Students not only go through “the writing process,” they learn “the writing process” on more of a metalevel:
1. I liked how this textbook laid out
2. how it presented the information . .
3. it gave kind of an introductory
4. in each chapter
5. definition of what that particular type of paper was investigating or explaining
6. and then it gave some examples
7. and then it talked about the process
8. and I wanted some guidance at that point
9. and time about how to better teach process . .
10. so that was helpful to me
11. and then I wanted that to be a part of the process that I wanted students to see
12. [in altered voice] oh look
13. here is a process
14. and the textbook says here is a process
15. so they trust that

Both teacher and student are learning “the process” from the textbook here. The teacher found “guidance” in the textbook (8), and then students also learn that there is “a process” (14). Again, the pedagogical philosophy of “process” is heavily linked to a linear progression, a blueprint that is provided by a textbook—process commodified for general consumption. One PTL indicated that among the things she most liked about her textbook was that if a student was stuck at any point in “the” process the student could go to the text and it would place them “right [in] the place where you are in the process.” Some of the other conceptual aspects that one might associate with “process”—for instance, understanding of how “form follows function,” understanding their own histories and habits with language, and leaving space for the particular drafting habits of individual writers—should therefore not be assumed to be a part of this general understanding of “process”8 (1997).

8. For excellent discussions of how process became homogenized in writing instruction, see Sharon Crowley (1998).
The textbook that is particularly popular in this program, for instance, provides step-by-step blueprints for essays that are in very formalistic academic modes.

More generally, adopting the “process” sequencing of a textbook seemed to take care of a lot of the decision making and work of building a class from the ground up. As a TA put it,

1. I liked
2. from a teacher’s standpoint .
3. how it emphasizes a progression in the writing
4. to where there are assignments that are linked to .
5. directly to research
6. research is covered in chapter 2
7. and then they have an annotated bibliography that is due .
8. that kind of leads them into an exploratory paper
9. which leads them into their research position paper .
10. so I really liked that that book sets up a lot of the assignments

Importantly, the assignments that are a part of most textbooks are among the features that most instructors feel compelled to use when they have chosen a textbook. Even many instructors who didn’t volunteer that assignments were a significant part of their initial decision making process said in other portions of the interviews that they either used the assignments in their textbooks or only deviated from them somewhat, such as with a favored assignment that they had decided to add in on their own.

Analysis of syllabi and various support materials indicated a high degree of conformance to assignments outlined in textbooks in the same general assignment sequences advocated in their texts. In some cases, assignments were slightly modified; in others, assignments were used verbatim—some tear the assignments straight out of the instructor’s manual and just copy them. Others described the textbook explicitly as a “blueprint” or “plan” with day-to-day assignments that form a logical assignment sequence. Assignments synchronize with chapters in textbooks, so the adoption of assignment sequences nearly always corresponds with a progression through a textbook in a class. Some participants did not provide day-to-
day assignments as a part of their materials, and their descriptions of the
degree to which their classes generally followed the sequences outlined
in their texts was indeterminate. In fourteen cases I was able to make a
confident determination of whether their courses followed the linear
progressions of their textbooks. Of those, eleven structured their courses
around the texts, chapter by chapter, in the same sequence as the texts.

Readings and Accessibility

While over half of the teachers volunteered readings as an important
factor in their choice of texts, what makes certain readings good or
bad—and how those readings fit into more general pedagogies—varied
considerably and was therefore difficult to generalize. Several men-
tioned the importance of having readings that spark controversy and
lead to good discussions and debate. While some indicated that they
chose texts in which the readings weren’t too hard or long, another
mentioned that she wanted readings that challenge her students. Still
another wanted readings that represent diverse voices and points of
view. The most consistently stated rationale for the use of readings was as
rhetorical models. In addition to providing fodder for discussion, read-
ings were intended to serve as the subjects of rhetorical analysis. One
teacher even indicated a frustration with students’ tendencies to read
for meaning, rather than as a means of understanding the rhetorical
choices of authors. She assigned them a reading about apes which they
found uninteresting, but she said that the point wasn’t to learn about an
issue concerning apes:

1. You are not reading about apes . .
2. you are reading about writing a persuasive paper . .
3. you know
4. you have to look at it for what the writer’s choices were . .
5. you even had things in the margins
6. I mean I tried everything to get them to see that it is a piece of
writing
7. that they should look at the organization
8. structure
9. all of those different elements
10. but when it came down to it . .
11. when it was on a subject that they didn’t like
12. they put up that wall to where they couldn’t see the writer’s choices
13. they didn’t use it as a model

So the reading isn’t serving primarily as a means of learning about a subject, or as a basis for reflection. It is provided by the textbook as a rhetorical model, a form to be emulated. Most of those who mentioned readings likewise indicated that that they liked how their texts matched specific readings with specific assignments, so students have an example. Again, the textbooks provide a blueprint for entire assignments, and the readings are a part of the overall system. This use of texts as models risks deemphasizing their contexts and consequentiality. Texts aren’t efforts to make meaning with specific audiences for specific purposes: they are, rather, forms to be emulated. This, along with form-driven assignments pursued in calculated sequences, can be seen as examples of Harris’s “new formalism” dressed up in the garb of process. There is an emphasis on form over function that conforms to standardizing logics in FYC.

Authority

Above I discussed the degree to which many instructors rely upon textbooks to provide validation for their pedagogies. The use of textbooks that others are using provides a sense of certainty—it ensures that they aren’t “coming from left field” with their approaches. Authority is somewhat related to validity, but it references how teachers feel they are being perceived by students. When teachers buy into, or at least profess, the approach that is being taken by a textbook, the textbook can then serve as a basis of authority for their approach. The appeal to an external authority is related to the institutional status of the teacher. Indeed, this may be a very important function of the textbook genre: that a particular assignment, technique, or evaluative rubric is included in a textbook lends it credibility among students. So the projection of authority relies in part on the degree to which a teacher’s overall pedagogy and classroom presence is in synch with the textbook. It derives from a degree of seamlessness. A TA describes the confidence she feels going into classes as being associated with the familiarity she has developed with the textbook. When doing prep work she anticipates the problems that students
are going to have with certain terminology—and then makes sure that she is both herself familiar with the term, and that she is using the same terms in class that the book uses:

1. I would say that it [the textbook] makes me feel more confident
2. going into each day-to-day situation
3. because in the syllabus you will notice that I have a kind of general . .
4. [alters voice] OK this is what we are going to talk about today
5. but really . .
6. in prep work it can refer back to that chapter that they are reading
7. and kind of get an idea of where they are standing with the subject
8. OK
9. they are probably not going to understand this term
10. or this term
11. and then I can refresh myself on some of the terminology . .
12. I made a mistake in my other class
13. of using different terminology
14. than what was in the textbook
15. and it provided a lot of confusion
16. so I really like to make sure
17. that I am describing things the way that the textbook is

Here the textbook is driving the pedagogy even at the level of verbally uttered vocabulary. The degree of seamlessness, along with the teacher’s reading ahead in the textbook, supply a level of authority. Surprisingly, the degree to which instructors draw on the textbook to project authority and competence doesn’t seem to diminish over time. A PTL with six years experience, for example, said

1. I think it definitely gives me more authority . .
2. if I can come into a class with a mini-lecture of ideas
3. that I want them to grasp
4. that is echoed in the textbook that they are reading
5. then
6. that definitely lends authority to what I am saying,
7. when we have talked about it in this way
8. in the mini-lecture
9. and we have learned about it in this way
10. in the book
11. and then we are going to work with it in this way
12. in an activity
13. that whole sequence lends authority to the teacher

A FTNTTL with ten years of teaching experience still feels the need to draw ethos and authority from the textbook:

1. I really feel that the backup that a textbook provides in a class
2. is necessary
3. it backs me up
4. in other words I didn’t make all of this up
5. I didn’t make all of these rules up

Interestingly, authority and the success of the “process” that is advocated by the book are somewhat synonymous. Another FTNTTL with nine years of experience said

1. I see this class as being in and of itself an argument to students
2. that here is a good process for you . .
3. and so I am up there demonstrating and modeling
4. through the different exercises that we do
5. and then the textbook is also telling them the same thing
6. part of it is
7. I think
8. establishing my ethos as a professor
9. you know

10. I am telling you this

11. but other people think this too

Among the questions evoked by these statements is whether the (at least perceived) need to draw on the textbook for external validation to project authority results from the teachers’ institutional status. How do tenure-track Ph.D.s establish authority in the classroom? Do they need to be as concerned about their authority? Do they generally rely on textbooks for this kind of external validation?

TEXTBOOKS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMPOSITION

Textbook publishing is a commercial enterprise, and if the enterprise is to be successful, the commodities it sells should be designed with the primary consumers in mind. With the textbook industry, the primary market is decision makers (WPAs and writing teachers). Textbooks are produced to generate profits, and because publishers understand their markets, textbooks respond to the material realities and needs of teaching labor in composition. This is in contrast to scholarship on the teaching of writing—which is primarily written with other scholarly professionals as the audience, and which rarely directly engages with the material realities of who is teaching under what conditions in composition. It is common to hear “marketplace” used as a euphemism for “democracy”—and one might even hear “marketplace of ideas” used as a euphemism for scholarly exchange and civic argument. According to this logic, the best ideas win out. Discursive spheres should not be conflated, however; what wins out in one sphere might be quickly dismissed in another. Persuasiveness in scholarly discourse is not derived in the same way, nor does it have the same impact, as persuasiveness in the more overtly market-driven realm of undergraduate writing classes. Scholars do often produce textbooks (though they are hardly the exclusive authors of textbooks), but textbooks are only scholarly to the extent that the ethos that comes with scholarship can be used as a means to sell them. They are reviewed and edited primarily for their marketability to writing teachers and program administrators, rather than for their contribution to the advancement of the field.

These two discursive realms, the scholarly and the commercial, are different in important ways. One can with validity muddy
the distinction, pointing to the ongoing, complicated relationship between industry and higher education—a relationship that has gotten muddier in recent years. Nevertheless, scholarly discussions have scholarly antecedents and take place in scholarly forums. Positions are taken, critiqued by informed participants, and become in varying degrees persuasive or influential or not. Much of the distinct apparatus of scholarly discourse—situating one’s work in relation to prior work that one is either building upon or taking exception to, the painstaking qualification of claims, the careful employment of specialized vocabularies—is designed to establish ethos, build consensus, and fortify one’s work against counterattacks in an ongoing, adversarial scholarly exchange. Scholarly discourse is overtly dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense: it references the previous relevant utterances and actively anticipates future (perhaps aggressively dissenting) responses from informed professionals. The commercial realm works according to different logics. Success is not based on persuasiveness according to scholarly critique, but on sales—“the marketplace of ideas.” And, as this research suggests, textbooks might not be adopted according to the soundness, the persuasiveness, or the currency of the theoretical basis on which they are founded. Rather, a host of far more local and practice-driven concerns drive textbook choices in many instances—cost, level of clarity for nonspecialists, consistency with departmental goals, adaptability of assignments and exercises, and so on. Textbooks don’t go to any lengths to justify themselves according to prior scholarship that is specifically referenced, nor do they employ highly specialized vocabularies. They are not generally written in a manner that invites or anticipates alternative views of the assumptions of literacy and learning that drive them. Rather, the always contentious assumptions that inform textbooks appear as prima facie facts and are left largely off the table in their content and marketing apparatus. They are more directive than dialogic: they provide blueprints and support materials for writing courses that are deployments of theories rather than scholarly exchanges.

9. In *Science in Action*, Bruno Latour (1987) provides a very useful description of how scholarly texts anticipate the dynamics of contentious discursive spheres. Latour uses military terminology when describing scholarly discourse. To bolster her case, an author employs “allies” in the form of citations, often in high numbers, to provide support. As she constructs her argument, she identifies “enemies” and the weaknesses they may use to undermine or destroy her case. Along the way, she uses “tactics” and “strategies” that are standard rhetorical moves in scholarly discourse (30–62).
than being the product of extensive reflection and decision making about theories. They thus construct their readership in a very different way. Textbook publishers certainly solicit feedback from users, but the concern is primarily marketing—not the development of a sustained and evolving body of research.

Ironically, even argument textbooks with titles like *Everything Is an Argument* don’t argue for their own efficacy based on sound research or scholarly theory. Everything is an argument—except, of course, why argument should be taught in this way. With textbooks, theory is black boxed. Pedagogy moves downward from theory, employed by those whose primary occupational concern is practice. The agency exercised by practitioners in this model is closer to the circumscribed agency exercised by consumers in neoliberal models of democracy. This is the important connection between professional identification, the terms of work in composition, and a highly profitable industry that is pervasive in the scene of college writing.

To be clear, I am not claiming that those who haven’t had advanced training in the field are not often excellent critical thinkers or are pawns of marketing ploys. I am saying that the terms of labor in the field do produce differences in concerns, dispositions, and occupational identification. Without the sort of disciplinary moorings, vocabularies of critique, and responsibilities and opportunities to help produce knowledge...
that come with professional status—and without support for scholarly activity and professional development—identifications and pedagogical orientations will tend to become more solidly moored to the work of teaching at particular sites. Certainly most of the teachers interviewed for this study didn’t identify within specific academic fields, and much preferred to talk about specific pedagogical practices rather than the assumptions about literacy and learning that informed those practices. Identification is centered on teaching writing according to the explicit and implicit norms established in this program, rather than on the ability to recursively theorize and thus critique particular pedagogies, textbooks, and programmatic goals. Moreover, concerns about student evaluations and conformity to programmatic norms had a direct impact on textbook and pedagogical choices. The primary considerations were overwhelmingly local. These concerns are doubtlessly amplified by the lack of solid professional standing of teachers whose jobs are riding on consistently good evaluations and the good opinion of the WPA.

There is no forum for questioning the premises of a textbook, only choices from a range of options that are determined by the industry—according to theoretical assumptions that remain largely unarticulated to the consumers. While they have deep roots in the rhetorical tradition dating back to Aristotle, textbooks are also an ever-evolving genre continually adapted to a marketplace—composition teaching, its tasks, and the terms of its enactment as labor. While they adapt to this milieu, they also help to shape it. As they shape it, they tend to generalize and homogenize. They must carry a portable, easily digested pedagogy philosophy. In my survey of texts, I found that very few textbooks designed for use in FYC courses reflect any awareness of the “post-process” informed critiques that have defined much of the recent scholarly discourse. Most continue to draw on a version of the constrained process theory that gained ascendancy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most also carry highly formalistic elements alongside the “process” elements. Highly popular argumentation rhetorics, for instance, focus students’ attentions on such activities as learning the many varieties of enthymemes, standard logical fallacies, and the nuances of Rogerian argument. They offer assignments, rigidly sequenced step-by-step research processes, and sometimes even the source material for research. Process and argumentative models become objects of curriculum rather than practices and tools employed as a part of consequential, social processes. The immediate, material circumstances of writing remain invisible.
Textbooks also help WPAs to find analogues for their programs in the textbook industry more generally. They therefore both legitimate and shape programmatic philosophies and goals. For instance, having argumentation as a primary focus in your program can be validated by the large number of argumentation texts. Some companies now even offer anthologies of readings to be used in graduate classes for TAs; even in graduate study, teachers are funneled toward particular textbooks, away from competing theories and alternative ways of doing writing education. The education of TAs becomes conflated with market development.

Describing the purpose of his documentary history of composition studies, John C. Brereton wrote:

This book chronicles the move from composition to every stage of a student’s college career to composition confined to the first year, and from a saturation in a rhetorical tradition of some two thousand years to its replacement with a new, streamlined curriculum which . . . emphasized error correction and the five modes of discourse. These were simplifications perfectly suited for the mass production education carried out in so many universities after 1900. How did the rich and complex world of rhetoric get replaced so quickly with composition? (1995, 17)

His answer is that the teaching of writing became relegated largely to the first year and given a lowly post–high school status rather than legitimate postsecondary academic status. I think that is only part of the answer. The other parts have to do with the terms of labor in writing education and, now, the increasing pervasiveness of neoliberal administrative policies in higher education. Writing textbooks are an opportunistic response to our field’s inability to change the terms of work in composition and thus reflect the tenuous relevance of scholarship in rhetoric and composition to the pedagogies that are enacted in many postsecondary writing classes. They point to the need for generative rather than directive models of professional praxis that integrate scholarly, administrative, and pedagogical work. They point to the need to recognize and change how we do what we do if we really want to positively shape how writing is actually taught.