The amount and quality of scholarship in composition and rhetoric signifies the good health of these fields, but one important instrument for measuring that health is still not readily available—the critical review of textbooks and other classroom materials. By what mysterious procedures do textbook selection committees make their choices? Where does an instructor find useful critical appraisals of the hundreds of attractive products displayed at the annual convention? The short reviews that appear in professional journals apply to only a fraction of the new books. Why are these particular ones reviewed and not others? The standard journal review, moreover, may appear long after a book has been published and adopted. And even then it will most probably be a reader’s review rather than a user’s review—that is, it will speculate on how a book might work rather than report on how it actually does work in a classroom.

Critical appraisal of textbooks at professional conventions is even more sparing. I don't recall ever seeing textbook reviews listed in the annual convention program, yet surely such a meeting provides a proper setting for teachers to exchange information about textbooks with their colleagues from different campuses. Some convention sessions and individual presentations illuminate particular issues in textbook publishing and the relationship between textbooks and curriculum. Beyond that, however, anyone trying to study and evaluate textbooks will have to rely on word of mouth and publishers' appeals.

What connection is there between the critical appraisal of
a textbook and its success in the marketplace? The production of
textbooks is an energy and money consuming enterprise that
affects not only the day to day content of writing courses but
their philosophical underpinnings as well. It is obvious, I think,
that if textbooks are to be used at all, they are second only to
teachers in their probable influence on student performance. In
the evolution of our professional journals and meetings, then,
why should rigorous critical reviews of textbooks have come to
occupy such low status that they hardly even exist? One reason
is that we lack a standard subject matter that might provide
criteria for comparison and evaluation. A composition textbook
is a subject-free guide to a process that reflects the particular
experience of its author. To evaluate it requires that someone
else's experience as a textbook user be compared with the
author's. A second reason is that the need for interaction
between student and teacher makes writing courses teaching-
intensive. Textbooks may provide a structure, but in a course
where the student's writing is the primary text, they are a con-
venience rather than a necessity. Teaching a writing course with-
out a textbook is not only possible but may signify unusual
ability and confidence on the part of the teacher. A third reason
has to do with advancement within the university. Tenure and
promotion go to those whose scholarship and research is compar-
able to that in other departments. Reviews of textbooks and
other pedagogical essays and presentations, whatever their poten-
tial benefits to the profession, do not provide impressive creden-
tials. Finally, a more practical reason is the magnitude of the
task itself. It's hard enough to maintain a current list of text-
books, let alone review all of them.

While these may be true causes of the low status of critical
textbook reviews, it should not be difficult to find defects in
them as good reasons. For example, the fact that textbooks are
propagated by such a wide variety of teaching experiences and
theoretical concerns should make the need for critical review
greater, not less. As to the second cause—the easy dispensibility
of textbooks in a teaching-intensive program—the relationship
between teaching and particular textbooks merits exploration. If,
for example, a textbook is theoretically sound but for some
reason undermines effective teaching, then a critical report to
that effect ought to be published. As to the third cause—the
problem of research, scholarship, and professional advancement
—we ought to make it clear that good textbook reviews, in addi-
tion to providing a useful professional service, are legitimate forms of scholarship that permit evaluation of the reviewer's critical skills, knowledge of the field, and sensitivity to classroom problems. Finally, the magnitude of the task itself ought to be a challenge rather than a deterrent. Indeed, we ought to feel a compelling professional responsibility to review every item available for classroom use.

I want to suggest two ways to fulfill this responsibility, one within the framework of national and regional conventions, the other by increasing publication space. The balance of theoretical and practical concerns that convention organizers aim for make the conventions appropriate settings for textbook reviews and reports. However, a new teacher of composition attending a convention will be exposed to a wide selection of sessions on theories and methods but very little critical information about materials. The redundancy of many of the sessions would not be objectionable if it did not crowd out the kind of sessions that I am advocating. The teacher who wants to become familiar with the range of books available might wend her way through the publishers' exhibits, but to sort, evaluate, and choose she should be able to hear the reports of colleagues formally and officially organized for textbook reviewing. These reports could take any of several forms: (1) straight reviews of new textbooks, (2) users' reviews of texts already adopted, (3) composite reviews of selected books arranged into categories or examined according to particular perspectives, (4) sessions devoted to variations on the use of a single text, (5) sessions devoted to the relationship between textbooks and current theories and methods, and (6) sessions devoted to exposing textbooks that are incompetent or outrageous. The 1983 CCCC meeting in Detroit included a few examples of textbook reviews that fit these categories. A session entitled "Reassessing the Young, Becker, Pike Heuristic: Frustration and Other Results" illustrates the possibilities of categories (4) and (5). Two individual presentations, "Classifying and Reviewing Basic Writing Rhetorics" by Christopher G. Hayes and "A Classification and Review of Basic Writing Handbooks/Workbooks" by Bruce Busby, illustrate category (3). But there should be much more.

In the absence of precedent, it apparently does not occur to prospective convention participants that they could propose convention sessions or presentations of this kind. For the present, then, the responsibility for arranging such programs lies
with the convention organizers, who should, in addition, make certain that reviewers have no conflict of interest and that the books selected for review represent a fair cross section of authors, publishers, and types. Certainly rebuttal, response, and discussion would be a part of any program of critical textbook reviews.

The same categories and caveats apply to reviews published in the few journals of composition and rhetoric, though the cost of publication presents an obstacle. Certainly reviews should not occupy the already limited space available for research and scholarship. What is needed is a separate review journal devoted exclusively to textbooks and other kinds of support materials such as video programs and the rapidly growing inventory of computer software. This is not the place to explore the details of funding such a periodical, but three general observations are worth noting: (1) a newsletter form, possibly as an insert to another journal, would be relatively inexpensive; (2) the usefulness of the proposed contents would be worth a modest subscription cost to most teachers of composition; (3) as potential beneficiaries, publishers would be willing to underwrite some of the costs of publication through advertising.

I propose that the Conference on College Composition and Communication organizes a task force charged with recommending specific solutions to the problem of textbook reviewing. An improved and broadened program of reviews initiated by a professional organization would offer benefits to teachers, publishers, and the profession-at-large. Such a program would provide teachers a useful resource for evaluating textbooks and planning courses. For others it would provide opportunities for publication based on both knowledge of the field and classroom experience. Publishers would benefit because they could see reports about how textbooks work in classrooms, how teachers respond to books outside the context of paid publishers' reviews, and how critical evaluation of a book affects sales. The profession-at-large would benefit because clarifying the criteria for reviewing clarifies the nature of the discipline itself. The complaints that textbooks are repetitious, that they are often at odds with current research, that they are diluted by market considerations are problems to be faced by professional composition teachers rather than publishers, whose principal concern is quite properly with sales. For example, a book in its second edition entitled How to Write in College has as its opening chapters "Spelling," "Capital Letters and Apostrophes," "Parts of
Speech," and so on. Now, what I would have called a manual of usage and grammar is being marketed and, apparently, adopted as a book on *how to write*. But the problem of what the proper labels should be belongs first to my colleagues and me, and only secondarily to the author and publisher. I believe that more critical discussion of textbooks will help to eliminate some of these untidy discrepancies and contribute to the growth and vigor of composition and rhetoric as areas of advanced study.

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