



TEXT AND ACADEMIC AUTHORS ASSOCIATION

## TAA Position Statement on the Academic Value of Textbooks

### Text Authoring as Academic Work

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Text materials, written and produced to facilitate the educational process, textbooks, software, video, and so on, occupy an uneasy position on the academic scale. Neither fish nor fowl, poised precariously between the worlds of the not-for-profit university and the commercial publisher, text materials and those who produce them often suffer from a sort of cultural dissonance. Several areas of misunderstanding can be readily identified.

Appearances can be deceiving. The outward appearance of text materials, particularly those written for beginning levels of study or for the high school-elementary school level, give the impression of being far from scholarly in the usual sense of the word. The very real scholarship that underlies successful text material production is often camouflaged by concern for learner accessibility, bright colors, illustrations, charts, and slick paper.

**Profit margins.** Text materials frequently represent a significant investment for a publishing house. It follows, then, that substantial attention will be paid to advertising, advertising that usually has more similarities to that used to promote shampoo than to the discrete ads issuing from university presses. Thus, the production and promotion of text materials may appear academically marginal, belonging to the marketplace more than to the academy.

**Familiarity breeds contempt.** Everyone knows what text materials are (especially textbooks) and everyone has ideas concerning their improvement. As a result, there is a natural tendency to view the production of text materials as well within the capabilities of any competent instructor, to see them merely as classes or courses transcribed and packaged. This is, however, far from the truth. Authors of text materials must be able to transform expert knowledge and field-specific jargon into accessible and understandable formats. In other words, they must not only know their field; they must also know their audience.

**Royalties are their own reward.** There is a common misconception that the writing of text materials is highly profitable. In our experience this is simply not true. Even if text materials make money (and this is not necessarily or even frequently the case), the time and effort expended usually far exceed the profits. There are, of course, exceptions to this—exceptions that tend to be well known. What is less well known or recognized is that many markets for text materials are highly competitive and crowded with numerous, high quality products. As a consequence, there are many unprofitable or, at best marginally profitable works. This is particularly true at the elementary-high school level and for introductory college/university materials.

### Academic values and text materials production

Earlier in this century, in many academic disciplines, it was considered a highly scholarly endeavor to write a text that summarized and integrated the disparate knowledge in one's field. Such writing was considered an academic service to the discipline and was typically done by faculty at the most prestigious research institutions. However, over the years, this view has eroded until now, it is frequently the case that the writing of text materials is seen as second rate work done by second class scholars. This perception, along with the lack of any clear-cut criteria for evaluating text materials as academic publications have tended to minimize their importance within the framework of the academic award system. As a result, many of the most able college and university faculty, who, in earlier times and in other academic climates might well have contributed to the mission of their institution by writing text materials, now shun such an undertaking. In fact, given the current state of affairs in both publishing and academia, if credit for good text materials writing is not forthcoming, it is reasonable to predict that the essential task of writing the text materials of the next twenty years will fall either to faculty who have abandoned all pretensions of productive research or, even worse, to teams of writers hired and controlled by publishing houses. In fact, in certain fields, such is already the case.

This is far from a trivial issue since its direct consequence is a loss of control over the production of knowledge. In research and other professional realms, the control over the production (i.e., publication) of professional knowledge is clearly in the hands of the profession. For example, refereed journals are edited by professionals in the field, and publication depends on the editor and reviewers who are also professionals in the field. Similarly, university presses exist to facilitate the publication of scholarly volumes of interest to a limited audience. With text materials, however, it seems that control is slowly shifting from academic professionals to commercial publishing interests. This is occurring, not because of publisher avarice but as a result of the perceived disincentives to the production of such materials by faculty.

### The place of text materials in the academic reward system

It can be argued that text materials, while by definition not on the so-called "cutting edge" of research, nevertheless, represent creation and academic innovation at the intersection of curriculum/teaching and research. In this sense, they mediate between rather narrowly focused research and the larger academic community. Their authors act as mediators between research and the application of that research in the educational enterprise. This task, we would argue, is an essentially academic one. It requires a knowledge, not only of the research context, but also of the classroom. It necessitates experience and expertise with both and, insofar as the job is done well, the production of such material is central to a college or university's institutional mission.

The basic question becomes one of classification. Text materials do not fit easily and exclusively under any of the three traditional rubrics of research, teaching, and service. Instead, the production of text materials lies at the center of the academic enterprise, simultaneously embodying elements of all three. We will return to this question below.

## Text materials as academic work

In order to encourage the writing of innovative and academically sound text materials, it is of the utmost importance that colleges and universities begin to view the production of text materials in much the same way as other academic output is viewed. This is not to imply that all text materials, any more than other scholarly work, should be considered as equally meritorious. It is to imply that the evaluation of text materials is no more inherently difficult than is the evaluation of research, teaching, and service; it is simply less familiar to the academic community. To this end, then, the following criteria and procedures for the evaluation of text materials in the context of promotion and tenure are proposed.

## Evaluation of text materials

*(Note that the suggestions below are intended to neither completely define nor to otherwise limit the possibilities. Obviously, institutions will have their own priorities and authors will have their own individual circumstances that may dictate additions, transformations, and/or deletions.)*

**Academic validity (scholarship).** As applied scholarship, good text materials should evidence awareness of current thinking in the field. Although, by definition, text materials, particularly at the entry level, must present a balanced view of a field rather than espouse any one particular theory or point of view, there should be clear indications that authors are aware of and knowledgeable about the present state of affairs in their field. Such indications may be found in ancillary materials directed to teachers as well as in the text materials themselves. Further, good text materials represent a creative synthesis and analysis. They point in new directions rather than being derivative of work already in the field. In this sense, text materials can be on the cutting edge of knowledge and in this sense, text materials represent a variant of what is usually considered research.

**Pedagogical knowledge (teaching).** The best text materials should evidence a clear concern with the conditions under which instructors work. They should help instructors to teach better and students to learn more efficiently.

**Service.** Good text materials provide a very real service to the academic as well as to the larger community. Effective text materials that embody current knowledge as well as innovative presentation often function more efficiently as a means of faculty development than do workshops, speakers, and so forth. In fact, we would argue that the most effective means of working toward change in college and university classrooms is through the medium of text materials.

In addition, text materials act as a liaison between the university or college and the larger community in that such materials are often the most obvious manifestation of what is taught and learned in various contexts.

**Evidence.** As aids to evaluation, authors could be asked to provide information about the conditions under which their text materials were produced. This should include but not be limited to a description of the motivating theories and principles underlying the materials and details concerning compromises that were made as the materials moved through production and promotion. Ancillary materials as well as student and instructor versions should be examined. Finally, materials produced during the peer review process and in the form of journal reviews, market research, etc. could be submitted.

Further evidence of the influence of the text materials(s) under consideration could be provided. This might include reviews, market information, letters of evaluation by users of the text materials, and evaluations by established text materials authors in the field. It should be kept in mind that adoptions may be influenced by factors beyond an authors' control (e.g., publisher's commitment to the materials).

The extent to which the text materials under consideration have been adopted by other instructors could provide one index of pedagogical effectiveness. In addition, student feedback might be sought. The fact that material goes into subsequent editions could also be taken as proof of its effectiveness.

## A final note

It should, of course, be kept in mind that the suggestions above are preliminary and that institutions will have to develop their own approaches and procedures. The importance of developing such procedures cannot, however, be underestimated. Insofar as text materials shape future students and future research, it is in the best interests of colleges and universities to take their writing and production seriously and to reward those faculty who successfully accomplish this delicate, creative, and essential work.