

Spring 3-12-2019

Textbook Evaluation Toolkit

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Recommended Citation

McHale, Christopher; McDermott, Ian; and Ovadia, Steven, "Textbook Evaluation Toolkit" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/lg_oers/72

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OER Toolkit Overview

By Christopher McHale, Ian McDermott, Steven Ovadia

March 12, 2019

Introduction

In Spring 2018, the LaGuardia Community College Library department was awarded a New York State grant to train students to evaluate textbooks. The project was led by Professor Christopher McHale, with Professors Ian McDermott and Steven Ovadia serving on the project team, as well as CUNY Office Assistant Elizabeth Arestyl.

The seminar lasted 16 weeks, with 15 students completing the hybrid seminar, which was hosted in the CUNY Academic Commons, using a combination private group/public blog. Each student received an \$1,100 tuition credit and digital badge for their participation and completion of all assignments. Students were selected using a two-step interview process (email and in-person).

Ways to use this toolkit

The goal of this project is to give faculty and administrators tools to help students evaluate the books being used in their classes.

In the conclusions that follow, specific recommendations are given for use in some imagined scenarios with broader lessons the project team learned from running the project.

This toolkit was created and tested using a seminar structure with current community college students as participants. All of the assessment tools included in this document were utilized over the course of the seminar. Participants evaluated samples from 9 different textbooks. In this iteration, the textbook samples targeted the core STM subjects of anatomy and physiology, biology and algebra. The samples were separated into packets containing one chapter from three of the textbooks, each addressing a comparable subject and topic.

Participants were given three weeks to evaluate and submit surveys for each sample in a packet. This structure encouraged the participants to think critically about samples and draw direct comparisons between them. Although this method proved useful for the purposes of this project, it is quite time consuming and laborious for all parties involved. It also resulted in a large collection of data, much of it qualitative, which will take a significant amount of time to review. For these reasons, replicating the project in its entirety may not be the best use of time and

resources, especially if the intended outcome is practical in nature. The project team encourages other users to use, modify and share the tools in different ways that better meet their intended outcomes. Some examples have been provided to guide users in the application of these tools, but they are not conclusive.

Seminar structure

Although it was time consuming, there were many benefits following the seminar structure that should be mentioned. The students that participated were active partners with faculty in a research project. This experience proved extremely enriching for the participants. Most of them completed additional requirements to earn a digital badge for undergraduate STM research. Several of them continue to share their experience at academic conferences. For this project, the students that were involved participated outside of their curricular program and were compensated through a grant. As a result, the project served as an extracurricular learning opportunity, or paid internship, rewarding participants with tuition waivers that they could apply toward their academic expenses. The project team highly encourages others to explore ways to include undergraduate students in active research and provide them with some form of a financial stipend.

The seminar model tested in this project covered a broad range of textbooks. In most applications, users may only be interested in surveying textbooks for a specific class or field. Decreasing the number of textbooks being reviewed is one way to make this model more practical. The project could easily be shortened to five weeks; providing one week for an introduction, three weeks for active review and a final week for reflection and summary, by focusing on samples from three different textbooks instead of nine. Adding additional chapters from each sample may increase the amount of time, but provide a more thorough review of the textbook being reviewed. Scaled down even further, one could even incorporate this model in a credit-bearing class as a project. The project team envisioned using this in credit courses on research that are taught by the Library Department, but it could also be incorporated in other subjects. The qualitative surveys used in this project required a lot of writing and reflection from participants. Encouraging students to explore more than one textbook for a subject would make them more aware of the resources that are available for subject mastery and independent learning. Faculty would benefit from knowing which chapters are more challenging for their students or from discovering chapters from other textbooks that might be more appealing to students with different styles of learning.

End of class setting

If use as a course project is not an option, the project team recommends that faculty include some form of textbook evaluation in every class they teach. End-of-semester teacher evaluations are common at most academic institutions. In many cases they are required and are used by administration for tenure and promotion. This, unfortunately, places most of the responsibility on the teachers and de-emphasizes the impact a required textbook may have on student learning and experience. Faculty can combat this by using their own textbook evaluation

survey along side the teaching evaluation that their institutions may require. The project team encourages teaching faculty to use some of the surveys included in this toolkit to begin collecting student feedback on textbooks at the end of each semester. A simplified version of the quantitative survey would be quick and easy, but faculty may find more useful feedback from some of the qualitative questions. These surveys can also be modified to fit a particular course or textbook.

Use with OER development

This toolkit can aid OER development through the use of the pedagogical materials and by conducting surveys to measure and gauge student opinion. Regarding the former, lessons on copyright and the textbook publishing industry, for example, are relevant to library and information science, education, and other disciplines. They can be used as-is for lecture, discussion, and library instruction. However, as information literacy is incorporated into student learning across the curriculum, these materials can be integrated into any course. In fact, incorporating the pedagogical lessons into an OER textbook (in any discipline) may help integrate information literacy into a semester-long course, instead of a single library instruction session, as is often the case.

An academic department, center for teaching and learning, or individual librarians and instructional technologists are encouraged to use the toolkit's surveys when developing OER textbooks. For example, a student focus group could take any portion of the quantitative surveys to determine their preferences on a range of topics: use of learning aids, real life examples, and the placement of illustrations, table, and graphs, to name a few. The summative reviews each seminar participant wrote could also be used in ongoing OER developments. An advantage of OER is the ease with which they can be adopted and adapted for different teaching environments, and this toolkit is designed to maximize this flexibility.

Use by a department or college for textbook selection

Similarly to using the toolkit to develop an OER work, an academic department, major, or program looking to select a new textbook, commercial or OER, to be used across multiple sections of a class might consider this toolkit as a way to test potential books. While selecting a textbook is the purview of faculty, the toolkit presents an opportunity to see how a book, or selection of books, works for students, from a pedagogical level, but also in terms of price-points. If the first-choice textbook of a department is dramatically more expensive than the second choice, perhaps a major or program would be willing to use the more affordable option, if it makes sense in terms of teaching and learning.

What's interesting about this idea is how it could scale. For instance, imagine testing a textbook about to be used for an introductory biology for majors class. Using this toolkit to test textbooks with students would reveal student preferences about specific books, but also about textbook information in general. That data could then be used to help inform the selection of a book for another class in that major or program, with the resulting book tested via the toolkit. Eventually,

given enough iterations, a department, program, or major, could build up an interesting data set of student textbook preferences, which could help inform textbook selection in other programs and majors.

Using the toolkit at the departmental or programmatic level, while not making students full-and-equal partners in textbook selection, does bring their voice into the process while also ensuring faculty select and use textbooks that help students master course content.

Develop an open rating tool, encouraging a culture of textbook evaluation

An aspirational goal for the seminar was to collaborate with a center for teaching and learning or instructional technologists to create an online rating tool for textbooks. While this could be a stand-alone review site, a review tool would ideally be developed as a plugin that could be used with learning management systems, blogging platforms (e.g. WordPress), or other course management software. This way, the review tool, and textbook evaluation, would be integrated into coursework, and not isolated from the syllabus.

Another possibility is for students to utilize, co-opt, or hack existing systems to make their voices heard. For example, students could post reviews they write on their own or in a class (using the toolkit) and post them on Amazon or other online booksellers. The same could be done with the popular professor rating site ratemyprofessors.com. Ultimately, posting textbook ratings, in addition to professor ratings, students can begin a much needed dialogue around textbook selection, calling attention to the systems of higher education that select teaching materials.

This repository contains the material used during the seminar. We have included documents in Microsoft format (Word, PowerPoint) and Markdown, wherever possible, so that the work can easily be transformable, using either a Markdown editor [<https://opensource.com/article/18/11/markdown-editors>] or Pandoc [<https://pandoc.org/>]:

- class syllabus
- final reflection
 - A final, five-question reflection was created to compliment the pre- and post-survey. The questions were open-ended and provide additional feedback from participants, and were included to assess learning objectives and intended outcomes for the seminar.
- pre and post surveys
 - The pre- and post- surveys were designed to collect data about the participants. The questions address academic experience, study habits and textbook preferences. Questions were adopted from the following:
 - CUNY Zero Textbook Cost (OER) student experience survey
 - Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)
 - Collegiate Student Assessment of Textbooks (CSAT)
 - four questions from the project team

- qualitative survey
 - Each textbook sample was also evaluated by a qualitative survey. The project team designed 15 free-response questions that ask the participant to provide details on the strengths and weaknesses they perceived about each sample. The questions were based on the research by Landrum, Gurung and Spann (2012) but re-written by the project team to invite open ended responses. Eight of the questions encouraged participants to reflect on specific aspects of the textbook samples by completing “I” statements.
- quantitative survey
 - A quantitative survey was used to assess each sample textbook chapter. The goal of this survey was to provide a simple, numeric assessment for each sample. The survey includes the 22 questions that comprise the Textbook Assessment and Usage Scale (TAUS) developed and tested by Gurung and Martin (2011), as well as additional questions from Gurung and Landrum (2012).
- document outlining participant responsibilities
- Summative review prompts
 - This summative assessment for each sample was modeled on a consumer rating/review model common in online marketplaces, like Amazon, but with a little more structure. The project team provided participants with a rubric based off the faculty review form from Open Textbook Network but modified for a student audience
- Parts of a book handout
- slides associated with the class (in PowerPoint)
 - Week 1: An introduction to the project
 - Week 2: Publishing models
 - Week 3: Copyright

This project would not have been possible without the hard-working student participants/collaborators:

Sukhrob Abdushukurov
Alexander Borges
Lensie Farley Chery
Luis De la Cruz
Nakesha W. Harry
Nicholas Herrera
Zhenzhao Hong
Majharul Hoque
Sakina Makwana
Salih Mansur
Mary Naughton
Anh Pham
Teqwona Roberts
Richard Rojas
Patricia Velasquez

Informed by the following resources:

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