Using Geography Textbooks

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Note: this is WORK IN PROGRESS

Introduction: textbooks in the 'resource ecology'

In the context of the 'information age', how *important* is the textbook? This is a hard question and is linked to *the role* textbooks are deemed to play in teaching and learning. It depends on whom you ask: publishers, authors, teachers, students, parents and examination boards - all have a view. How important textbooks are considered to be ultimately depends on what these interested parties actually want from a healthy teaching and learning relationship.

We think it is important to keep an open mind on this issue. It might be a mistake, for example, to indict the textbook as being *responsible* for boring teaching. Having access to a limited range – or even just a single course book – does not *necessarily* mean rote learning is the only option: again, it rather depends on what *the role* of the textbook is thought to be in the educational transaction.

And what about ICT? Is the textbook yesterday's technology for yesterday's schools? We think not. We ask are more sophisticated question - about the place of textbooks in the *'resource ecology'* of geography classrooms. Though textbooks seem to be strangely undervalued (or perhaps taken for granted) by teachers, especially in the UK, we will argue

that they will remain key, but in fundamentally changing settings, and that their value needs to be reasserted. The fact that state schools are chronically under-resourced with books in comparison with successful private schools, speaks volumes. It is disturbing that pupils often share books in class, and many schools do not *allow* pupils take books home (often supplying in their place photocopied fragments of the book, in order to fill the homework requirement), and it is worrying such a state of affairs *seems now to be accepted as normal*. Textbooks are relatively cheap, they do not break down and can even work during a power cut! This chapter should help you maximise the benefits from textbooks in the learning ecosystem.

Classrooms as ecosystems

It is now unexceptional to suggest that classrooms can best be understood as 'learning environments'. The analogy is probably especially appealing to geographers! The essence of the ecosystem concept is that any environment can be analysed and understood in terms of how its energy runs through it in a highly organised and structured way. Transferring the concept to classrooms allows us to see them as:

- *Complex* – what you see is not necessarily *all* that is there; eg the teacher's preparation, and how the students have been inducted over previous months may be highly significant.
- *Multidimensional* – they have social, psychological, institutional and other dimensions. These interact resulting in a cacophony of simultaneous events and processes.
- *Fragile* – they can sometimes be easily upset, maybe by one disruptive element (or person) such as a change in the weather, a news event, an occurrence in the corridor, the network going down …

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1 From the GA New Secondary Teachers' Handbook (forthcoming: expected Spring 2005)

- *Different* – subjects, teachers, locations, time of day … all lead to certain ‘givens’ or contexts, and different energy flows – compare your year 9s on a Monday morning and a Friday afternoon.
- *Dynamic* – they have an unpredictable quality; change is constant partly because the students always bring their experiences and something new each day.

The position and role of the textbook as an element in such dynamic learning environments is poorly understood – or at least confused. They tend to be taken for granted, arguably one of the ‘givens’ of schooling. In some cases, they are understood primarily in *managerial* rather than educational terms; after all, having a set of textbooks helps a teacher manage the challenges listed above and to ‘keep on top of’ the students.

Perhaps this is true, but seeing textbooks in such instrumental terms may conceal a number of pertinent educational matters. These can come to the fore if we imagine the textbook as an integral part of the system – the ‘biome’ – through which there is an energy flow. We do not have to launch a detailed exposition of ecology to make my point, save for an example or two. When we accept that any environment (say, a tropical forest or a temperate grassland) can be analysed in terms of *where its energy is stored*, we see that the answer is in the balance between three components:

- in the soil,
- in the dead and decaying leaf and animal matter on the ground or
- in the living matter itself.
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It cannot be anywhere else. The precise balance between the three varies considerably however.

So where is the ‘learning energy’ of a classroom stored, and how does it flow through the system? It is not too fanciful to imagine the answer also lying in a balance between three components:

- the students,
- the teacher and
- the learning resources.

(We will resist drawing any closer comparison than this, but readers may want to link, strictly for fun only, the two lists of three: which of the above list is the ‘living matter’? Which is the source of sustenance to allow growth, ie the soil? Which is the classroom dead and decaying ‘leaf litter’?).

If we can begin to analyse classrooms in such terms it may enable us to ‘place’ textbooks (and other learning resources) in different classroom settings. As with the study of natural ecosystems or biomes, such a study leads us quickly to further questions concerning *function*: thus, in clarifying what actually is the *role* of the textbook in different classroom settings, we can ask (for example):

- What part do textbooks play in the network of events and relationships that contribute to learning?
- If textbooks were withdrawn in what ways would the learning ecosystem be damaged?

The Learning Ecotone

Our ecological analysis can be developed a little further. Mike Horsley and the Teaching Resources and Textbook Research Unit (TREAT) at the University of Sydney have looked at the way textbooks continue to evolve particularly in the context of the wider resource environment including the digital information explosion. Horsley (2001) has proposed the

biological concept of ecotones to help analyse these changes in a way that avoids the erroneous assumption that new computerised technologies will simply replace the old print-based ones. In his own words:

> ‘Biologists use the term ‘ecotone’ to describe an area where two adjacent ecosystems overlap – for example where a forest gradually turns into grassland. The ecotone has an ecology of its own. It can support forms of life not found in either of the adjacent systems. Today, there exists the educational equivalent of an ecotone between traditional learning environments and the emergence of new learning environments designed around student centred interaction and the internet and technology based learning tools.’ (Horsley 2001 p38)

The underlying point here is that although there have always been different classroom ecologies as discussed above, they have in fact mostly operated under the same set of *educational assumptions*. Over the years these have pretty well governed fundamental classroom relationships within superficially diverse *teacher-student- resources* learning ecologies. Put another way, differences in traditional classroom appearances may be so superficial, they may be no more than one might expect from within a *single* ecosystem.

However, there is now burgeoning interest in other possibilities that may result in fundamentally different learning ecosystems. This has been stimulated at least in part by the advent of new technologies, but more importantly by educational philosophies that fully acknowledge the agency of the student in social settings. In short, we are distinguishing here the fundamental differences between traditional knowledge transmission models of education from more progressive constructivist models. We could think of a continuum showing the ecotone lying between the two ‘extremes’ (Figure 1). The textbook is alive in all environments, but its particular function in the context of wider learning resources and in

relation to the energy stores represented by the teacher role and that of the students varies, possibly quite fundamentally.

Knowledge Transmission	**Educational Ecotone**	**Knowledge Construction**
Teacher directed	Transitional	Learner centred
Passive, linear learning	Transitional	Active, question driven
Individual orientation	Transitional	Group and collaborative

Figure 1 Two adjacent educational ecosystems and the ecotone.

The left hand side captures a traditional learning environment, in which the focus of the curriculum was primarily the identification of worthwhile content and the purpose of teaching was to pass this on to the next generation. The textbook framed the structure of the course in order efficiently to 'deliver' the contents*. Textbooks were authoritative, and sometimes lasted in print for decades. Teachers adopted the role of transmitter, and the students were receivers.*

The right hand side shows changes in the way curriculum is understood, which have led to role changes: the collective purpose of teacher, student and resource(s) is to act together to *make meaning*. There is no longer a single, authoritative information source. Teachers facilitate. Students' prior knowledge is valued.

It is likely that at any time many contemporary classroom learning environments lie within the ecotone between. Both here and on the right hand side of the continuum, the particular role of textbooks play the learning environment needs clarifying. When clear about the role(s) textbooks can play, teachers can then set about evaluating and selecting the best suited to

their purpose – and as we go on to show, though many geography textbooks may look fairly similar at first glance, more careful scrutiny reveals significant differences.

In a fascinating piece of research examining the nature of textbooks in geography during the twentieth century, Rex Walford portrayed '… the strange case of the disappearing text' (Walford 1995). In the context of our current discussion it is tempting to view this account as one showing the *adaptation* of textbooks in the ecotone. Walford states that,

> '… it seems incontrovertible that informational text has slowly been disappearing from so-called 'textbooks' over the last seventy years of geography. Some books have better cause to be called 'activity books' or 'work books', given the balance of material within them.' (ibid p5)

His research is inconclusive as to the implications of this, but there is recognition that it may well be that the loss of extended prose has been induced by authors and publishers responding to the needs and preferences of students in the information age. Students are said to think 'mosaically' rather than linearly and are used to getting their information more from talking and listening than from reading books. Walford's quote seems to imply that, in his view, it is not so much a matter of the days of the textbook being numbered; the traditional 'textbook' may have already died – at least as a single source of authoritative information.

Evaluating and selecting textbooks

We should be clear that we have no doubts that textbooks have a key place in teaching and learning. This is because research evidence (Chambliss and Calfee 1998; Graves 2001; Lambert 1999; 2000; Keele 1999; Marsden 2001) shows that

- textbooks help teachers
- textbooks help students, and

- textbooks can lead to healthy curriculum change and renewal.

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