

Widening the Scope of Thinking by Widening the Scope of Textbooks

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A text can be defined as anything that provides information, whether primary or secondary, that aids in the study of a particular topic. This is what I was taught within my first few classes at college in the United States. This threw me off, as throughout my schooling in India, I was taught that text could only refer to textbooks. A textbook that was used as the standard to follow in the study of a particular course. I was surprised that most of my classes in college did not use any textbooks. I was assigned movies to watch, speech transcripts to read and fiction and non-fiction books to absorb. It was an idea alien to me that such materials could be as effective, if not more so, in the instruction and learning of a course.

I was used to being read out to from a textbook and being told that my answers had to match the material in the textbook, lest I fall short of being academically proficient. The information in the textbook was considered correct, even if outdated. For example, in my entrepreneurship textbook in class 12, we were taught about the Companies Act 1956. We were told that we had to memorise all the provisions of the Act. We were never taught that this Act was replaced by the Companies Act, 2013. This rendered the knowledge gained in the classroom obsolete and inapplicable, as following the textbook was considered more important than disseminating knowledge that was valid and useful to students.

I believe that textbooks are very important in the earlier stages of education. They provide a framework within which teachers instruct their students. They also enable students to keep up with the material taught in class more easily, as textbooks are used as a point of reference to learn the material better. However, I think that textbooks should be structured better. In the aforementioned example, the textbook would have been more relevant to the realities of today if it had been edited after the ratification of the new Act. Perhaps this could be ensured by timely reviews of textbooks, thus ensuring that obsolete material is replaced with more valid information.

I also believe that students should not be tested on obscure information. For example, my political science textbook in class 12 included a flowchart on all the coalition governments since 1989, including the Prime Ministers that led those governments. This flow chart was worth four marks in that year's board exam paper. Should any of us become political scientists and policy makers, the information that would prove to be helpful to us would be the various advantages and disadvantages of a particular system of government, as opposed to who the Prime Minister was a decade before we were born. Textbooks are helpful only when they reflect the realities of our time.

At the same time, it must be recognised that textbooks are not the only materials that reflect the realities of our time. Other mediums, such as movies, documentaries, articles, speeches and social media platforms may also be used as methods of instruction in a course. Most students use these sources in everyday life to learn more about the events taking place around them, even globally. Therefore, education would be more effective if students are instructed via methods that they themselves actively seek out. A comedian commenting on a pertinent issue on a talk show may be as important as the statistics of the same issue as highlighted in a textbook. This may also enable students to develop a multicultural and multi-faceted perspective of the issue.

No single method of instruction should be used in isolation. Every method has its own unique advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantages of each method can be minimised and even eliminated by the supplementary use of a different method. This would also reduce the stress experienced by students, something that is a widespread problem in our country. The use of many forms of media and print would ensure that fatigue in students is minimised and that absorbing information becomes more a pleasurable activity than a stressful chore.



To a certain extent, perhaps teachers should also be given more freedom to determine the syllabus. This syllabus, along with any changes throughout the duration of the course, should be approved by a board comprising of experts as well as educators. This would provide for a more flexible use of the textbook, in accordance with regional realities and differences. After all, the relevance of a particular piece of information is dependent upon the region it is used in, too. An option within the textbook may also prove useful. Going back to the class 12 entrepreneurship textbook as an example, the section on setting up a business included steps specific to the city of Mumbai. As a student in Delhi, these steps bore no real value for me. In this case, the book should have included the steps for all the metropolitan cities of the country, giving students a choice to study the steps most relevant to their region, or eliminated such a section entirely. It does not make sense to have a workload that does not bear fruit in the future.

I studied in the traditional system, using only the textbooks prescribed for a class to study the course. The advantage of such a system is that my classmates and I rested easy, knowing that every question asked would be from the textbook. However, the disadvantage is just that: we rested easy knowing that we did not have to really know what we were talking about as long as we had it memorised. We knew that we did not have to engage in much critical thinking. This is in contrast to the structure in college: there is very little or no material for memorisation. Everything has to be read, watched and listened to, only to be critically analysed. This gives us the freedom to think and brings diverse perspectives into the classroom discussions, which widen the scope of everyone's thinking, including, perhaps most importantly, the professors'.

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