

**TEXTBOOK USAGE IN THE UNITED STATES:
THE CASE OF U.S. HISTORY**

John F. Wakefield

President, Text and Academic Authors Association

Paper presented at the International Seminar on Textbooks, Santiago, Chile, April 19-21, 2006.

Abstract

The purpose of this presentation was to interpret the results of two large-scale assessments of textbook usage in light of criticism that textbooks are ineffective teaching/learning tools. One assessment occurred as a follow-up to a Schools and Staffing Survey involving 3,994 classroom teachers, who were asked about their classroom practices in 1994-1995. The other assessment involved 29,000 students in Grades 4, 8 and 12 as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in U.S. history in 2001. Results from the earlier study indicated that reading from a textbook peaked as a classroom activity in the intermediate elementary grades and high school grades, and that at the secondary level, it occurred more often in social studies than in any other core subject. Results from the 2001 study indicated a positive association between frequency of textbook usage by students and scores on measures of knowledge and skills in U.S. history in Grades 4 and 12, but not in Grade 8. The results of these two large-scale studies suggest that frequent usage of current textbooks helps students develop basic knowledge and skills in U.S. history in elementary and high schools. Current social studies and U.S. history textbooks seem better adapted to assimilation of knowledge and skills, however, than to the development of new understanding, which should peak during a period of transition such as middle school or junior high school. (Contains 5 tables, 5 references)

TEXTBOOK USAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: THE CASE OF U.S. HISTORY

John F. Wakefield

President, Text and Academic Authors Association

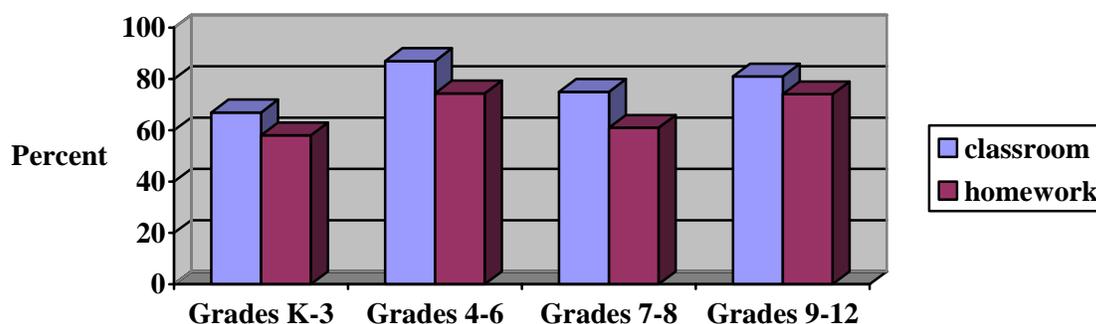
Textbook usage has long dominated classroom activities in the United States, and relatively recently it has become controversial. In the 1980s, many textbooks were perceived by critics as instructionally ineffective, and textbooks in general were targeted as a major cause of students' failure to learn as they should (Tyson & Woodward, 1989). Since textbook-related activities occupied the great majority of classroom time, it was argued, poorly written and boring texts were primarily responsible for low test scores and other indications of underachievement. But how many students use textbooks in classrooms in the United States? And is frequent use of textbooks related to school achievement? These questions initiated a line of research that is active today and that is beginning to provide some interesting answers.

How many students use textbooks?

Studies of textbook usage in the 1980s and early 1990s were relatively consistent. Depending on the age/grade level and subject of the class, 70% to 95% of activities in United States classrooms were estimated to rely on textbooks (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998; Woodward & Elliott, 1990). At about the same time, a teacher follow-up to a Schools and Staffing Survey was conducted by the U. S. Department of Education on classroom activities and materials. A total of 3,994 K-12 teachers were surveyed about their instructional activities. One of the survey items asked, "How often did planned in-class activities require that students use a textbook?" Another item asked about homework that required use of a textbook. Response choices ranged from "never" to "almost every day."

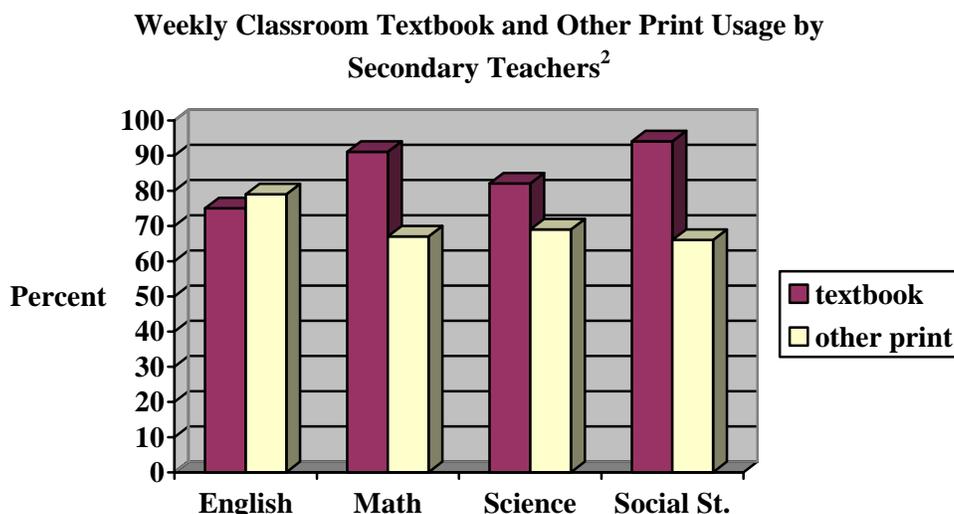
The resulting report was published in 1999 as *What Happens in Classrooms? Instructional Practices in Elementary and Secondary Schools, 1994-95*. In the survey, an average of 74% of teachers reported using textbooks in class at least once per week, and an average of 63% reported using textbooks in homework at least once per week. The most extensive use of textbooks in classrooms appeared to occur at the "intermediate" level, or Grades 4 through 6. Usage in middle or junior high school seemed to decline somewhat but rose again in high school. At all levels, frequency of usage of textbooks in homework assignments reflected frequency of usage in classrooms. Textbooks clearly had an important role in the classroom and in homework, but they were just as clearly not the only influence on learning. Their influence was not self-evidently the cause of students' poor test performances.

Weekly Textbook Usage by Grade Level¹



Social studies textbooks in the United States were of particular interest because they appear to exert a greater influence on classroom activities than do texts in other disciplines. When teachers were asked to report the frequency that they had students use texts in class (shown below), 94% of secondary teachers who taught social studies reported that they had students use textbooks in class at least once per

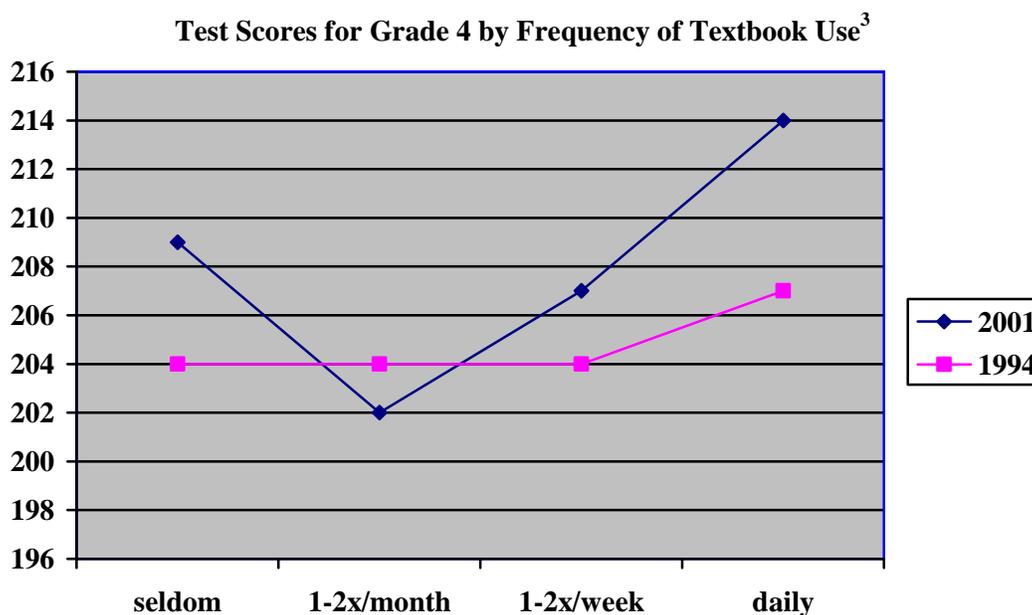
week, higher than teachers in any other discipline. Similarly, only 66% of social studies teachers used print materials other than textbooks in class, lower than teachers of any other major discipline. These results, combined with the results from the analysis of grade level use, indicated that social studies and history textbooks might be considered a “test case” for the proposition that poorly written textbooks might be a major cause of student underachievement.



Is frequent use of textbooks related to school achievement?

In 2001, the National Assessment of Educational Progress assessed knowledge and skills of a national sample of 29,000 students in U.S. history in Grades 4, 8 and 12. The assessments were structured to increase emphasis on historical analysis and interpretation with increase in grade level. A corresponding de-emphasis was placed on historical knowledge and perspective with increase in grade level. Criteria for interpreting test scores were set at three levels: Basic, proficient, and advanced. In an accompanying survey, students were asked the question, “When you study history or social studies in school, how often do you read material from a textbook? Response choices for Grades 4 and 8 ranged from “never” to “almost every day.” Response choices for Grade 12 were similar. The results from the 2001 tests and surveys were compared with results from a previous assessment in 1994 and published in 2002 as *The Nation’s Report Card: U.S. History 2001*. If textbook usage were not correlated with achievement, we would expect a zero correlation—or in graphic terms, a flat line—to indicate no increase in achievement with increase in frequency of textbook usage at each grade level.

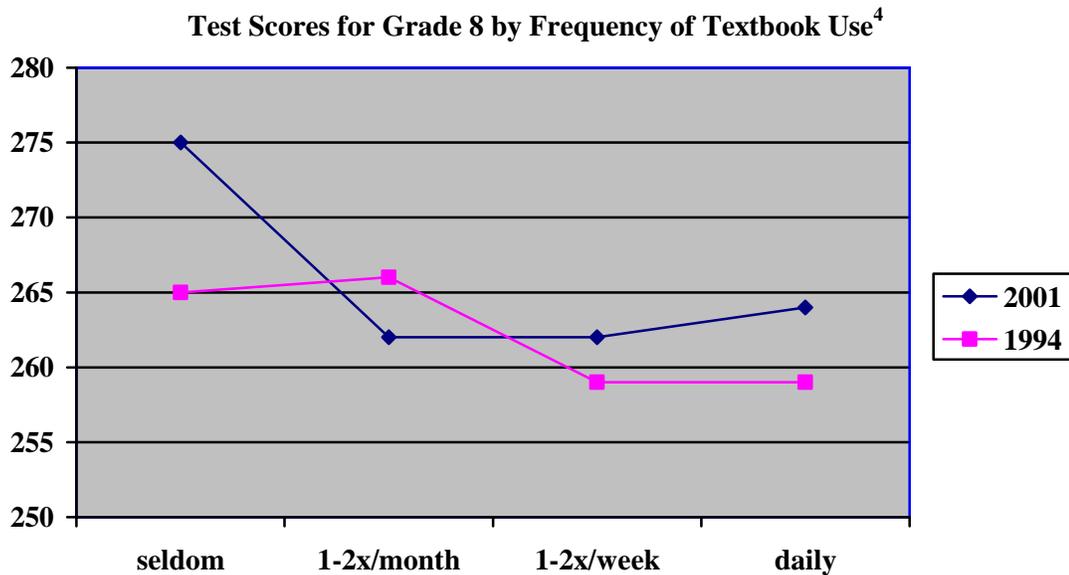
The 1994 results for fourth grade indicated as much. It was a pleasant surprise when the 2001 results for fourth grade were not a flat line but a J-shape, indicating that student achievement was generally associated with more (rather than less) frequent textbook use. Students on average were achieving slightly above the basic level (associated with a score of 195), and their textbooks appeared to be helping them do so. There was clearly room for improvement, but if students were reading from their textbooks at least once per week (and 88% reported doing so), their textbooks appeared to be assisting them in 2001 in a manner they were not assisting them in 1994. Daily usage seemed particularly beneficial. Fourth-grade students who read their textbooks daily in 2001 performed significantly better ($p < .01$) on the U. S. history test than fourth-grade students who read their textbooks daily in 1994.



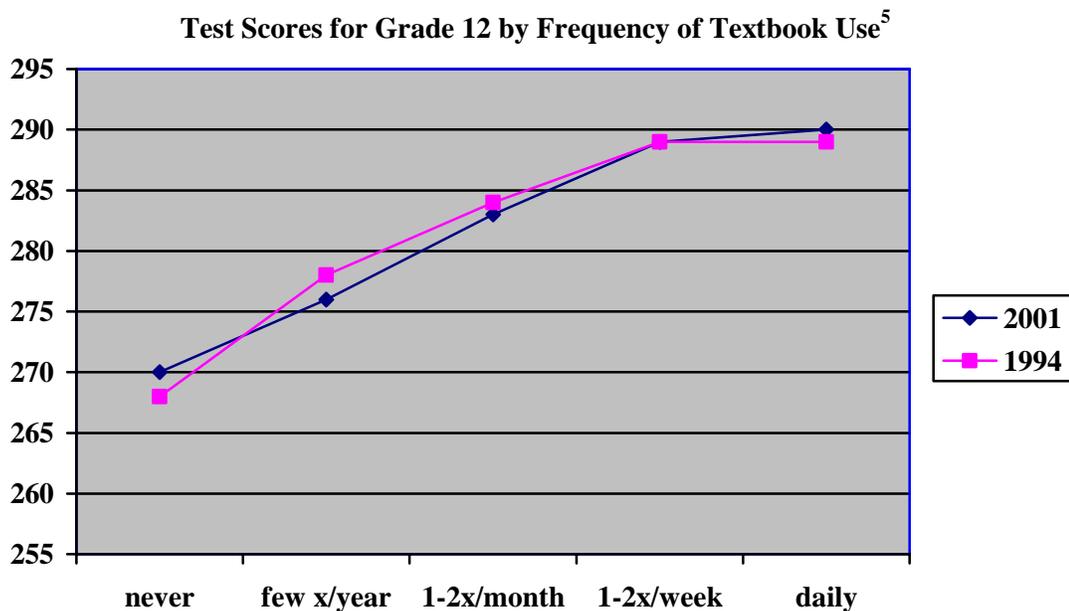
What had changed from 1994 to 2001? One variable can be excluded. The percentage of students using a textbook at a given level of frequency did not change much. The frequency distributions for fourth grade were relatively consistent from 1994 to 2001, with 87-88% of students reporting having read their textbooks in class at least once per week, and a total of 5% (in both years) reporting having read them seldom (“never or hardly ever”) in class. Frequencies of textbook usage did not change, but test scores did change as a function of usage. The results seem to point to changes either in the contents of textbooks or in the manner of their use as explanations for test score differences from 1994 to 2001.

Findings from other grade levels are interesting because they do not consistently confirm the findings from the fourth grade. The results for Grade 8, for example, showed a “flat-line” pattern for both 1994 and 2001, signaling that U.S. history test scores at that grade level were not associated with increased frequency of classroom textbook usage. The results for 2001 actually took on a bit of a reverse-J shape. The 3% of eighth-graders who reported seldom using textbooks in class performed somewhat better on the U.S. history test than the 90% of eighth-graders who reported weekly or daily usage. These findings suggest that for many students in middle or junior high schools, history textbooks do not seem to help them learn U.S. history much. For at least a few students at this level, basic historical knowledge and skills (associated with a score of 252) were and are being constructed in ways other than by using textbooks.

Why might textbooks be less effective tools for instruction in the eighth grade than in the fourth grade? One explanation might be that textbooks in their current form may have a more useful role to play in consolidating a student’s knowledge than in provoking new thought. They may serve as tools more useful for transmitting knowledge than for developing understanding. In Piagetian terms, they assist students in assimilating information more than in accommodating it. In the great cycles of education, the elementary years and the high school years seem to be periods when assimilation peaks. Accommodation, on the other hand, seems to peak during stage transitions, such as the ones associated with early elementary years and with middle school. As long as they are designed as tools of assimilation, textbooks may be most useful during intermediate elementary grades and during high school. If textbooks are to be useful during periods of accommodation, they may need to be fundamentally redesigned to provoke thought or to render problematic what just a few years earlier was unproblematic.



That is one way to make sense of both the disappointing results of the “flat-line” chart for the eighth-grade results (above), and the re-emergence of the apparent usefulness of textbooks for increasing achievement in the 12th grade (below). In Grade 12, scores on the U.S. history test were clearly associated with frequency of textbook usage in 1994 and 2001. A total of 80-82% of 12th grade students reported reading from their textbooks in class at least once or twice a week, while 6% (in both years) reported usage only a few times per year, and 5-6% reported never using textbooks in class. Students who reported having read more frequently from their textbooks in class scored higher on the U.S. history test than students who reported having read from their textbooks less frequently. Frequent usage of textbooks was only associated with test scores that reflected a basic level of knowledge and skills (set at a score of 294), rather than proficient or advanced knowledge and skills.



At this time, few conclusions can be drawn from large-scale studies of textbook usage. Only studies of textbooks themselves can tell us whether or not they are poorly written or boring. What can be concluded from recent large-scale studies of textbook usage in the United States is that frequent usage of current textbooks appears to help most students learn the basics of U.S. history, both at the elementary and at the high school levels, but not at the middle school level. Correlations remain to be done to test the significance of relationships between test scores and frequencies of textbook usage. New studies need to be designed that allow researchers to control for the influence of variables such as school ability. What exists is a good foundation for further inquiry.

Notes:

¹⁻²Data from U.S. Department of Education, 1999

³⁻⁵Data from U.S. Department of Education, 2002

References

Chambliss, M., & Calfee, R. (1998). *Textbooks for learning: Nurturing children's minds*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Tyson, H., & Woodward, A. (1989). Why students aren't learning very much from textbooks. *Educational Leadership*, 47(3), 14-17.

U. S. Department of Education. National Center for Educational Statistics (1999). *What happens in classrooms? Instructional practices in elementary and secondary schools, 1994-95*. (NCES 1999-348). Washington, DC: Author.

U. S. Department of Education. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. National Center for Educational Statistics. (2002). *The nation's report card: U.S. history 2001*. (NCES 2002-483). Washington, DC: Author.

Woodward, A., & Elliott, D. L. (1990). Textbook use and teacher professionalism. In D. L. Elliott and A. Woodward (Eds.), *Textbooks and schooling in the United States* (pp. 178-193). Chicago, IL: The National Society for the Study of Education.