

Out “Couldn’t You At Least Throw Us a ~~LINE~~line?”

by Deborah Skinner

It’s been two plus years since I’ve used a textbook in any of my upper division marketing and graduate level courses. Although from my perspective it has been successful, I’ve been encouraged to look at things through the eyes of others (this time the students). Hence this is a quick note as an update to “Walking the Tightrope without a Text” from the Marketing Educator, Jan. 2001.

I should start by thanking my dean, who not only gave me permission to try something new, but also encouraged me despite the risk of possible failure. The encouragement helped me to “stay the path” even when times became difficult. Okay, maybe not difficult, but trying. Here are some examples of those semi-difficult times.

Like the set of evaluations after the first attempt at textlessness from the graduate advertising and promotions class. Here are some of the students’ comments (my translation of what they really meant in parentheses).

“How are we supposed to learn the material without a text?”

(I hate participating in discussion and reading articles – couldn’t I just curl up with a textbook and memorize the theories?)

“I think your experiment failed. I had to work much harder at understanding the material – doing assignments, listening and participating in discussions, keeping up with current events and articles – then I would have if I had used a text. I work 45+ hours a week. I don’t need to work so hard outside my job.”

(I thought this was going to be just like my undergrad classes – read, give back on a test, move on to the next class.)

“Go back to a text. You use too many real examples. It’s hard to know what you’re trying to get us to learn.”

(I’m a structured thinker. The “analyze this” ad stuff requires more creativity and critical thinking. Sometimes there’s more than one right answer. I don’t feel comfortable doing it.)

Okay, I took some liberties with my translations, but overall the message was clear in what was said and what was not said. “We’re uncomfortable. We hate having to work harder to learn without a text for the class.” Being the kind of untenured professor that takes feedback from classes and uses it to continuously improve on the learning environment fashioned in my classroom, I made some slight adjustments for the graduate students the next year.

On the syllabus, in place of REQUIRED text, I RECOMMENDED a small paperback text for those students committed to using something tangible, with bound pages, weighting at least 5-10 ounces. In other words they needed a security blanket of the academic kind! It worked. Although I stressed the students were not required to purchase a text, it was there – a safety net. The comments for that semester changed too, from the “I can’t do it” frame of mind to the “Could you make it a little easier?” viewpoint. Here’s another round of feedback.

“If Prof Skinner continues to teach the class without a text book then I would suggest she hand out an outline of the discussion at the beginning of class”

(Please provide a table of contents of the discussion, including major headings and subheadings in bold print with indicated insertion points for relevant examples, charts, graphs or any other doodling on the board.)

“The articles were interesting and stimulating but I think they should have been used with a book rather than instead of a book.”
(So I didn’t want to buy the recommended book and do the extra reading on my own. I have to be TOLD to read anything extra).

And then the more positive notes –

“I thought the material was covered thoroughly and a text book is not needed for the class.”
(Thanks – I saved \$80 and still learned the material).

“I was impressed that Prof. Skinner didn’t just use a textbook approach to teaching the class. That would be the easy way out. Instead she worked to keep the information up to date (very current). This non-traditional approach was a nice break from the routine.”
(Not every class has to be taught in the same format – textbook , lecture, test – thanks for trying something different).

After year two I admit to feeling some sense of accomplishment. At least someone recognized all my hard work! Despite some students’ doubts that learning could occur without the traditional structure of detailed text chapters, they did as well if not better on similar tests, assignments, etc. before and after textbook dismissal. Answers to test questions were just as detailed on theory and framework but contained more

practical application and examples. I truly think some of those that considered their studies less thorough actually left with more knowledge; including extensive functional expertise and the ability to directly apply the materials to their jobs and personal life (how many of them regularly analyze the quality of commercials on T.V. now?). So how do I know? Other than just as good if not better test scores and thoughtful answers, there are the great semester long campaign projects (top notch work).

I'm on year three. It's going well. The current events of the last 18 months have helped tremendously. What a great opportunity to compare September 11, 2001 and days following to September 11, 2002. Could we have a better application environment than Enron, Martha Stewart, Pepsi on the Space Shuttle, BMW Mini-Cooper on magazine page margins etc.,etc.? Yes, there's still a recommended text and I overtly point out the value of a text to those with a predisposition to traditional academic practices. But fewer students are buying it, the book, I mean. They're feeling more comfortable with the idea of discussion, keeping current and challenging theories and charts with straight off-the-press situations. Or maybe word has finally spread. I can imagine the conversation in the halls.

“You're thinking about taking Advertising. You know Skinner doesn't use a text book. No, it's not easier. It's weird, man. Don't take her unless you're into working in the class. That's right, readings every week. Not just one, sometimes 5 or 6, and more than just a page. It can take some time to get it all done and do the assignments and think of applications. Yes, you've GOT to bring examples to class. What? You don't read a newspaper or any magazines? You don't watch any T.V. or check out billboards on your way to work? You haven't heard any of the publicity about the World Com scandal? Man, don't even think about taking Skinner's class. You better play it safe. You're not ready to go without the net. Make sure to check at the bookstore for a class that REQUIRES a text.”

The graduate students definitely offer a different perspective. And I truly appreciate their insight. It just hasn't been enough to convince me that I need to go back to assigning chapters in a textbook in order to foster a challenging, practical, learning environment for the students enrolled in my courses. Now, to handle the flack from my colleagues...