

Opinion

Shredding textbooks is no way to educate a child

Every year, covers are torn off thousands of textbooks in Texas. The inside pages are shredded and reduced to pulp. And the state not only approves but applauds. Not all of the books that are sent to the shredder have been soiled and defaced by the little hands of eager students. Some have never been used, let alone worn out.



Loren Steffy

But the textbook-recycling process gives no consideration to the condition of teaching materials. If the state of Texas will no longer be using them, then no one can.

From an official standpoint, this isn't waste, it's a means of ensuring a quality education for Texas schoolchildren.

It's unclear whether the state, the

publishing companies, or both lack concern for the fate of these teaching materials — and it really doesn't matter. What matters is that educational resources are being destroyed indiscriminately, merely because the state no longer has a use for them.

The information contained within the pages of the shredded books could be valuable tools for libraries, tutors, student-teachers, or even parents of students who need extra help in school. But, to perpetuate the publishing companies' monopoly, the books are destroyed regardless of condition or worth outside of the paper mill.

The state enters into an agreement with textbook publishers that once books are no longer being used in Texas schools, they will be returned to the publishing company. The publishers then turn the books over to paper recyclers, making a small return on the tonnage of pulp.

The state is paid an exchange rate by

the publishers when the books are first purchased. This gives the publishing companies several guarantees. First, it assures the companies that no one else will get their books, thereby keeping all other possible markets open. Second, it means the state will need to purchase new books every few years.

So the state gets updated books, and the publishers get an almost-guaranteed long-term sales contract. It sounds like a wonderful symbiotic relationship that benefits students, state and salesmen alike. But, of course, there's a catch.

Once the state is through with its books, it assumes the texts are worthless except for their exchange rate. Most publishing companies didn't become multimillion-dollar corporations by thinking of books in terms of their value to people. To them, books are commodities that must be sold to make a profit. Since all states need school books, the publishing companies have their pick of the arrangements.

I have seen several boxes of textbooks from an elementary school in Bryan that are going "out of adoption" — the official jargon for books that are destined for destruction. One set of books, *Departures*, a boxed set of supplementary readers published by Harper and Row, had never been opened. It was in its original shipping container, also unopened.

Other texts that had fallen from grace included *Rhymes and Reasons*, a fourth-grade reader published by MacMillan, and *Read Better, Learn More*

Book A, another reader published by Ginn and Co. The copies of these books, while not pristine, obviously had seen little use.

Some of the books I saw were children's story books. Because of the 1980 copyright, the state can no longer use them as supplementary readers in the classroom. But some of the stories, such as *The Secret of Gourmandy*, *No Roads for the Wind*, *Comits*, *a Book of Comic Skits*, *Lost!* and *Henry Aaron and Babe Ruth*, are timeless entertainment that still could benefit children's sections in libraries or bookshelves at home.

These books are not controversial. They don't contain references to secular humanism; except for one science book I saw, none even mentioned evolution. Their only fault is being copyrighted six years ago — making them obsolete for Texas classrooms and, by the state's agreement with the publishers, for general consumption as well.

All in all, there were 20 to 30 different texts in the boxes I saw. No one I talked to in the Texas Education Agency or the publishing companies seemed to give a second thought to what was happening to the books.

Texas is extremely protective of the textbooks that are in adoption. Once a school district is no longer using a book, the editions must be returned to the TEA. Teachers are allowed to keep a few copies as reference resources in their classrooms. If one district has a surplus of a certain book and another

comes up short, the TEA coordinates exchange between the two. Strict inventories are taken to make no book goes unaccounted.

But the concern is for monetary educational purposes. It's not that the state wants to keep its resources current. But it's deep that the concern does not extend beyond the classroom. A true commitment to education means supporting it in all forms. Just because a book is obsolete in the classroom doesn't mean it's been drained of its educational potential. Learning can come from sources in many settings. But shared out-of-adoption books benefits everyone except the publishers — and the profits lie not with education, but profit.

Destroying good textbooks just because one owner no longer wants them ought to be a crime. Whether the publishing companies, or the villains doesn't matter. Someone ought to throw the book at them.

Loren Steffy is a journalism graduate and editor for *The Battalion*.

Because several members of *The Battalion* editorial board will be attending the Columbia Scholastic Press Association Conference in New York City from March 14, some of the columns this week will not appear on their regular days.

Farmers Write!

Do congressmen read the letters?

The public has been told many times that the best way to participate in government, other than voting, is writing their congressman.

Kirsten Dietz

Guest Columnist

When I thought about writing my congressman, I navelly pictured my letter being opened and carefully read by him and his staff. They would discuss it and then my congressman would write me a personal note. I guess I realized that scenario wasn't realistic, but I never thought about it much.

Like I said, I was naive.

So when I came to Washington D.C. and began my internship, I was surprised to learn that when a person takes the time to write his congressman, the congressman almost never sees the letter. Instead, reading and replying to the avalanche of mail — Congress received about 300 million letters last year — falls on the shoulders of the staff. The procedure for answering constituent mail varies from office to office. Offices such as mine, which receive a great deal of mail, send most writers a form letter. My office has a binder of almost 200 such letters dealing with issues the senator tends to get a lot of mail about. The form letters are on a computer so, with the push of a button, a constituent and the office both are happy. The constituent gets a quick and personal-looking response on an issue he feels strongly about, and the staff doesn't have to spend a lot of time on each letter. The letter even comes out of the computer complete with the senator's signature. So the senator not only never sees the incoming mail, but he does not even personally respond to it or sign the outgoing mail.

This sounds callous, as the constituent is the only reason the representative is in office. But it is because the constituent is so important that he gets the form letter. Writers must be answered, but it is unrealistic to expect a congressman and his staff to answer up to 1,000 letters a week. If they did, that's all they would do.

In my office, the Connecticut constituent gets priority. Out-of-state is rarely answered, as a senator's office receives so much in-state mail. In-state requests also are honored before those from out of state.

Admittedly, answering the mail is time-consuming, and some staff members feel it is beneath them. So in many cases when a form letter isn't an adequate response, the task of answering the mail falls to the lowly intern — one of whom is me. This also bothers me. I don't feel qualified to answer a letter on tax reform, Contra aid or changes in Medicare, even with access to research. What 20- or 21-year-old is qualified to speak for a senator? How would you feel, know-

ing that your carefully-written letter is being answered by a college or high-school student?

Most of these letters are pieced together by "plagiarizing" a variety of information sources. Yet sometimes the intern can formulate the representative's opinion on a matter. In one of the first letters I wrote, the senator was asked how well the media draws the nation's attention to world hunger. Being a journalism major, of course I said the media are doing an "excellent job." But is that really how the senator thinks? I have no idea, and neither does anyone else on his staff.

Though it seems the constituent is being treated unfairly, the constituent doesn't seem to think so. This is evident not only from the incredible volume of mail, but from its content.

Some letter writers seem to think the congressman is capable of anything, especially when it comes to their individual problems. Every office — especially a representative's, as he has a smaller district than a senator — handles individual casework. This includes things such as finding a lost social security check or helping smooth the way for a relative's immigration.

One man, who was not doing well in the snow-plow rental business, asked the senator to help him get a defense contract because he had elderly parents and a child to support. Another woman asked for an honorable discharge for her husband who is stationed in Germany. She is afraid that their separation will lead to a divorce.

People who write these kinds of letters write their congressman because they have nowhere else to turn. To them, the congressman is a powerful figure who can do just about anything. But all too often, the slightly odd letters are trashed with little or no thought as to why they ended up in the congressman's office to begin with.

So, while the constituent is considered top priority, is he treated as such?

True, form letters, intern and staff-generated replies and the auto-pen free the congressman and his staff to do the things they must get accomplished that day. But, as a constituent, I'm not sure the response is equal to the effort it takes to write a congressman.

Kirsten Dietz is a journalism major who is interning with a U.S. representative in Washington D.C.

Column submitted for *Farmers Write* should be between 700 and 850 words. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit for grammar, style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each column must be signed and must include the major, classification, address and telephone number of the writer. Only the author's name, major and classification will be printed.



18th Century Incurable Romantic...

... 20th Century

Mail Call

Finals frustration

EDITOR:

A topic that has not received much publicity is the proposal signed by President Vandiver requiring all graduating seniors to take final exams. Most students have not paid any attention to it. But this proposal will affect ALL students beginning Spring 1988. To accommodate graduating seniors, finals week will become Friday of Dead Week, Saturday, Monday and Tuesday. With this schedule, students will not have an entire weekend to study before finals begin. While we are not completely opposed to finals for graduating seniors, they should not be scheduled at the expense of the entire student body.

This proposal also will make "graduation weekend" a thing of the past. The commencement will be moved to the Friday after finals. The commissioning ceremony will be eliminated and Final Review rescheduled to a different weekend. Now, some parents will have to make two trips to see all of the ceremonies. When my parents came down for my graduation ceremony, they enjoyed seeing campus life with all the students. Since finals will be over on Tuesday, the dorms will be cleared out by Wednesday — so much for students on campus attending commencements. And what about graduating seniors who live in dorms? Will they be kicked out on Wednesday and be forced to stay at a local hotel at their "affordable prices?"

Don't graduating seniors have enough to worry about — like interviewing for jobs, going on plant trips (hopefully) and finding a place to live, among other things? Isn't finding a job the ultimate FINAL exam, anyway? If you're unhappy about this proposal, contact Dr. Vandiver and let him know.

Jon Genetti, graduate student accompanied by 50 signatures

Highway sick

EDITOR:

Before I arrived at Texas A&M last summer, I used to wonder why everyone made fun of Aggies. Thanks to *The Battalion's Mail Call*, I now understand. An overwhelming number of its reply letters reveal the "Highway 6 runs both ways" attitude so prevalent on this campus, carved into

tradition by the Corps. I had hoped that the rest of the student body could overcome this restrictive attitude. However, after reading the letter by Sonya Brewer in Thursday's *Mail Call*, I am convinced that the end of civilization on the A&M campus is very near.

In her letter, Brewer demands that gays, women in the band, students with opposing viewpoints and even noisy vehicles traveling through College Station during Silver Taps (does this include ambulances?) should cease to exist because they are irritating "little things" that disturb Aggie tradition. Now, I love Aggie tradition just as much as any other Aggie, but I didn't know that this tradition included flagrant disregard for the rights of people who irritate you. If every individual on this campus were allowed to dispose of all the people who annoyed him, Highway 6 might be very crowded, and the A&M campus would look like Southern Methodist University's football stadium.

As for the claim that the sun sets and rises on this campus — everyone would like to believe that the world would stop turning if he weren't there to push it, but unfortunately this is not true. It is precisely this self-centeredness which causes so many disputes between people and among nations. If A&M really is, as Brewer claims, a place where gays are considered sub-human, women should be "thanking the University for being allowed to enroll as students," and people with differing opinions are advised to keep quiet, then I can think of one place very similar to A&M: the Soviet Union — where repression of people and ideas is an age-old "tradition."

I propose a new tradition for all you "true Aggies" — tolerance. Try it. You might be surprised when you find that gays, minorities, foreign students, women in the Corps and even students with opposing viewpoints are actually people and not just material for jokes. As Aggies, we have a responsibility to make all people feel welcome at A&M, not just those people who conform to our individual standards. After all, Highway 6 runs both ways, but let's keep the traffic coming in instead of leaving.

Melanie Shouse '90

Letters to the editor should not exceed 300 words in length. The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters for style and length, but will make every effort to maintain the author's intent. Each letter must be signed and must include the major, classification, address and telephone number of the writer.

The Battalion

(USPS 045 360)

Member of Texas Press Association Southwest Journalism Conference

The Battalion Editorial Board

Loren Steffy, Editor

Marybeth Rohsner, Managing Editor

Mike Sullivan, Opinion Page Editor

Jens Koepke, City Editor

Jeanne Isenberg, Sue Krenek, News Editors

Homer Jacobs, Sports Editor

Tom Ownbey, Photo Editor

Editorial Policy

The Battalion is a non-profit, self-supporting newspaper operated as a community service to Texas A&M and Bryan-College Station.

Opinions expressed in *The Battalion* are those of the editorial board or the author, and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Texas A&M administrators, faculty or the Board of Regents.

The Battalion also serves as a laboratory newspaper for students in reporting, editing and photography classes within the Department of Journalism.

The Battalion is published Monday through Friday during Texas A&M regular semesters, except for holiday and examination periods.

Mail subscriptions are \$17.44 per semester, \$34.62 per school year and \$36.44 per full year. Advertising rates furnished on request.

Our address: The Battalion, Department of Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4111.

Second class postage paid at College Station, TX 77843. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *The Battalion*, Department of Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station TX 77843-4111.