



Questions Teachers Should Ask in Choosing Instructional Materials¹

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It is difficult to make reliable and valid evaluations of anything. This is especially true of instructional materials which can be either good or bad depending on the way they are used. Therefore, whether you are a teacher or a researcher you soon develop a healthy respect for the problems of evaluating instructional methods and materials. Nevertheless, evaluation is both desirable and inevitable. The issue is not whether we will or won't evaluate materials, but rather how thorough we will be in our evaluations.

Instructional Materials Centers have shown great interest in the problem of evaluating materials. In recognition of the importance of having a sound basis for selecting, using, and improving instructional materials, various evaluative procedures are being designed and tested. From the teacher's view the problem of evaluation focuses on selecting and using material which will increase children's learning. The Instructional Materials Centers can be of much help: providing means for sharing evaluative information, helping teachers increase their evaluative competency, identifying particularly promising material, and increasing the emphasis on the issues and criteria of greatest importance.

Future articles will deal more specifically with the problem of defining criteria which you might use in evaluating a given instructional material. The current article intends only to establish the relation between evaluation and selection from the teacher's viewpoint.

When a teacher decides to use or not to use an available material, an evaluation is being made. The criterion used is probably whether or not the material looks like it might help the pupils learn. This approach is surely a low level and highly subjective evaluation, but it is a start. From this simple beginning you can develop a useful approach to evaluation.

Since the primary purpose of evaluation is to enlighten the decision-making process, what sort of enlightenment will help you make a decision about whether or not to use an instructional material? Some of the questions you should consider are:

1. Does the material or device have sufficient attractiveness or curiosity value for the children you teach? Be careful to think in terms of what you know about your pupils. Some materials have "teacher appeal;" others have "pupil appeal." Be sure you know which is which.
2. Does the material lead to learnings or accomplishments which are in the mainstream of your pupils' needs? Sometimes a well-designed curriculum can be pulled to pieces by overemphasis on irrelevant activities. This question should not rule out recreational or contrast-for-fun activities and materials, but you should always be careful not to decide that certain learning

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experiences are important merely because good materials are available. The value the teacher places on various teaching objectives is usually reflected in his plans for the children's use of their school day. What the teacher sees as truly important will be emphasized both in the complexity of and the proportion of time spent on instructional procedures.

3. Are the contents and subject matter of the materials accurate and relevant? This question should be listed first if we are concerned about problems which might completely disqualify the use of an instructional material. No matter how attractive, how much related to mainstream curriculum, or how effective, if the material contains subject matter inaccuracies, it should be revised or discarded. Few teachers or supervisors take time to read every bit of a text or listen to every line of an audio program. Therefore, most content flaws show up after a material has been adopted and purchased. At this point the problem is to revise or adapt.
4. Does the teaching value justify the cost of the material? This is a tough question, because we like to believe that cost should not be a consideration when the needs of children are concerned. But the facts of life dictate that since funds are always limited, you have to face this issue. How do you know in advance about the teaching value? You don't. Small-scale trial uses of new (especially expensive) procedures and materials will help you get such information. There are sad tales still being told about schools that made lavish investments in certain untried teaching machines. When teachers found that they couldn't use them effectively, the machines were prematurely retired to dusty storage rooms.
5. Can the materials or the procedures which the materials suggest be adapted to better meet individual or local needs? In the case of materials which require correction or improvement, the necessity of adaptation is obvious. But many materials which have no particular flaws can become even more effective and more relevant in the hands of an imaginative teacher. The first step in a creative adaptation of a particular instructional material is to evaluate the material in the light of its original intent and its recommended use. Before you begin exploring what else a material will accomplish or how else a procedure might be employed, be very sure that you understand what its authors and designers had in mind. Better still, actually put it to use in the exact manner indicated in the teacher's manual. The absence of a teacher's manual is a useful clue that the material may not have been designed very carefully. After you are experienced with the designer's way of using the material, you are in a better position to put your insights and creativity to work.

The essence of sound evaluation is objectivity. You must be careful not to be prematurely "sold" on a procedure or material. Obviously, a salesman or producer who has a financial stake in a material has his own reasons for being convinced that his is the latest and the greatest. A real professional doesn't get "carried away." Your role demands a suspicious and inquiring attitude. Look for strengths and weaknesses. Consider many factors—not just the most obvious. A layman looks at the wrapper and becomes excited; a professional removes the wrapper and squints coldly inside. A parent thinks of whether or not his child will be helped; a professional thinks about the many children who might be helped, but inquires further to see just how much each child is likely to be helped. The teacher who becomes a "promoter" quickly loses objectivity and perspective.

The Instructional Materials Centers provide access to representative and promising materials in a pressure free objective setting. Visits to the Centers or short-term loans of instructional materials will afford you a new way to more carefully consider the decisions you make as you select material.

Professional competence of today's teacher demands more evaluative activity than ever before. Your career, and certainly your sense of worth, depends on your professional competence. Put these suggestions into practice:

1. Know what instructional materials are available. Be familiar with the various new and established materials and procedures.
2. Develop skills as a materials evaluator. Every teacher evaluates; but few teachers evaluate systematically.
3. Be objective.

Be the competent professional who selects and uses instructional materials in order to increase the learning of children.