

Exam boards should stick to examining



Colin Foster
Teacher at a
secondary school
in the West
Midlands

Suggest teaching virtually any course in a UK school today without using a textbook and you will be met by looks of incomprehension. Every GCSE subject, every A-level module, has to have its own textbook, usually expensive, produced by, or with, the appropriate exam board.

Gone are the days when teachers used their professional skill to seek out whatever books they thought would be most useful to help them in their teaching. Today, what little choice there is can be between a lot of quite similar-looking titles rushed out to meet the latest specifications, and inevitably containing an embarrassing number of "careless mistakes".

Is this to anyone's benefit other than the giant publishing companies? Supporters argue that it simplifies teaching if there is one book containing only the exact material that is required to pass the exam, with nothing unnecessary that might confuse the learners. Perhaps it also caters for teachers who lack confidence or skills.

Exam board marketing seeks to convince you that you are disadvantaging your pupils if you fail to buy into its latest products. If it is produced by the exam board, we are constantly told, the style and approach will marry that which will be found in the papers – in fact, cynics might complain that a large proportion of the textbook will probably be devoted to reproducing the board's own questions.

I think we ought to worry about the tendency for exam boards to want to take control of the course teaching, rather than just its assessment. Exam board-based Inset has the potential to indoctrinate teachers into ways of thinking, which are then rewarded when reproduced by the candidates. This gives examiners too much influence over our children's education.

Previous generations sometimes learnt from books in their 10th or later editions, in which the text had been honed over time to the level of a "classic". Nowadays unfortunate authors, pressurised into

ludicrously short deadlines, have to write faster than they can think, with little opportunity to weigh up ideas.

In the past, keen pupils could read around the subject simply by looking at sections of the book that they were not required to study. Now, anything not immediately relevant is cut away, or flagged up as "extension material".

The exam board-produced textbook is a blatant attempt to corner a market with low-quality, over-priced products designed to have a short shelf-life. It seeks to bypass the teacher, relegating them to a mere assistant in the learning process. Pupils begin to treat other materials with suspicion; suggestions of wider reading or apparently unrelated tasks are unwelcome.

Would anyone who wasn't sitting the exam buy one of these books simply because they were interested in the subject matter? That is clearly not the intention and, frankly, there are much better books out there if you simply want to learn.