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The Joys and Sorrows of Writing an Undergraduate Textbook

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My name is Catherine Sanderson, and I'm an associate professor of psychology at Amherst College, in Amherst, Massachusetts. My first textbook, on *Health Psychology*, was published in 2003, and my second textbook, on *Social Psychology*, will be published this fall by John Wiley and Sons. I'm delighted to share my experience with other professors on both the joys and sorrows of writing an undergraduate textbook. This talk will answer the most common questions I hear from professors who are contemplating writing a textbook - and/or are wondering why I decided to write a textbook. And I'm looking forward to hearing, and answering, other questions you might have.

1. 'What was the biggest challenge in writing a textbook?'

For me, there were three very big challenges.

First, as a researcher, I know the most current theory and research in my particular sub-section of the discipline. I read these articles, and I conduct my own independent research on these topics. However, I really didn't know very much about the most current theory and research in other subsections of my discipline - when I first started working on my social psychology book, most of my knowledge about these other areas came from the social psychology class I took as an undergraduate (now more than 20 year ago) and the social psychology textbook I was using in my class. So, I first started working on the book by just reading journal articles to really immerse myself in the latest work.

Second, it was pretty overwhelming at times to read and respond to all of the detailed and thoughtful feedback that I get from reviewers (professors from other colleges and universities) on drafts of my book. Sometimes the comments were very easy to follow, such as recommendations for a compelling example to add or a recent article that would be good to include. But in other cases, the reviews suggested more a major revision, in terms of organization of the material or addition of new areas of material to cover. This type of very detailed feedback was extremely useful – and clearly ultimately made the book better – but was very, very time-consuming in terms of making such changes (and this was somewhat stressful when I was working on a tight book deadline while simultaneously trying to do my “regular” professor work of teaching classes and grading). So, I think you need to have very good time-management skills in order to write a textbook!

Third, I was really unaware of how much of a “big business” textbook writing is, particularly for books in crowded markets. In the field in which I wrote my first book, *Health Psychology*, there really aren’t very many books, nor are there very many students taking classes in this field. Thus, I was largely left alone to write the book I wanted to write, with relatively little input from my editors and reviewers.

In the field in which I wrote my second book, *Social Psychology*, there are many books, and many good books, and thus my editor and publishers were really focused on trying to find a way for my book to stand out. This meant a lot of trial and error, including working with my editors to come up with new features or themes or structure for my book, which were then sent to other professors for review. Some of these ideas worked, and others didn’t, so we were constantly revising in an attempt to help my book distinguish itself from others already on the market (and since this process was totally unfamiliar to me, I relied heavily on the very good and thoughtful advice from the Wiley editors about what changes to make and why). This “listening to the market” - what professors across the country were saying they were looking for in a book - was very time-consuming, but really shaped the nature of my book for the better.

I was also surprised by how much of the selection of a textbook by professors didn’t seem to relate to the actual content of the book - but rather the availability of various “bells and whistles,” such as power point slides, a test bank, and video/DVD clips!

Another question I get a lot is...

2. ‘What was “joyful” about writing a textbook?’

It is probably easier to reflect on the “joyful” part of writing the books now that they are both finished! But I did find a lot of my work on these books very rewarding. For one, I really enjoyed reading and thinking about the work in my field, and how it fit together. This reading helped my teaching - I came to class having just read the latest articles and with new examples of research in action, which made teaching a class I’d taught for 10 years seem new and exciting. I also felt that this reading helped my research – it often sparked new ideas of how to connect different ideas or approaches within my field, and I’d then integrate these ideas into current research projects. I’ve always loved teaching social psychology, and it is now really exciting to think about sharing my passion for this field, and my excitement of research, with students all over the country and not just in my classroom.

3. ‘What was the biggest surprise about writing the textbook?’

There were two big surprises for me - one good, and one not so good. On the positive side, I found the whole process really fun. It was interesting to read broadly in my field and think about how different findings and theories fit together. It was fun to read real-world examples to illustrate findings in my book in a way that hopefully sparks student interest. And it is fun to use my book in my own classes - which I’ve already done with my Health Psychology book and will do next spring with my Social Psychology book.

On the negative side, I was surprised by how many very small details seem to take up a huge amount of time. I’m choosing photographs for my book now, and it takes a surprisingly long time to review all of the options the editor has found for even a simple suggested photograph, such as “two friends talking.” Do I want men or women or a man and a woman? Do I want people of a particular ethnicity or clothing style? Do I want people with a distinct facial expression? Similarly, I went through all of the examples in my book chapter by chapter to make sure that I was using names that reflected the diversity of the students who will be using this book – and not just using “Jane” and “John” as names, but also “Mei-Mei” and “Tyrone” and “Juanita.” Even finding all of the references for articles and books cited in my book, and formatting them in the correct style, took a lot of time.

4. 'What advice would you give professors who are thinking about writing a textbook?'

I'd highly recommend writing a textbook if you like to write, enjoy reading broadly in your field, and are very open to feedback and collaboration (from editors and other professors). Those three characteristics seem very important to me - and going into writing my books, I knew I liked to write, but I didn't have any sense of how very much reading I would need to do across multiple areas within my field nor did I have a sense of how very collaborative writing a textbook would be.

I would definitely not write a book for the money! Let me put it this way - I signed the contract to write my social psychology book in the spring of 2002, when my second son, Robert, had just turned 1. He is now 8! During those 7 years, I spent many weekends and evenings and even vacations working on this book - and it still isn't clear how well this book will sell, since it isn't even on the market yet. I definitely do not want to calculate my rate of pay in terms of dollar per hour!

Another question I hear a lot from professors is

5. 'What are the biggest differences in writing textbooks versus other academic books/articles?'

Writing a textbook is definitely quite different than writing other types of academic books and articles.

First, I was used to writing journal articles and book chapters for a highly specialized audience - mostly other professors and researchers in my field. This writing is therefore pretty technical in terms of language and jargon, and also assumed that the reader would have a thorough understanding of a lot of the background material. In contrast, writing a textbook is really writing for a very broad, and much less knowledgeable, audience. I had to make sure I was clearly conveying terms and providing definitions, and that I was explaining concepts and theories at an appropriate level. This got easier over time (with practice) but was initially pretty challenging to just get into that different mindset.

Second, I had really never given any thought to the pedagogical features of a book - and so this was a very different way of thinking about how to best present the material. This involved thinking through many seemingly small but important details - should the definitions for key terms be provided in the

margins or just at the end of the chapter, should there be brief summaries of material throughout or just at the end of a chapter, what types of cartoons and photos and figures would best illustrate the points I was making in the text? So, instead of just focusing on the writing, as I do when working on an article or chapter in my professional work, I also needed to focus on various design and pedagogy pieces and this was definitely a big difference. My editors really helped walk me through thinking about all of these key issues - which was, for me, a steep learning curve!

6. 'What would you do differently next time?'

There are two things I'd do differently next time - if, in fact, there is a next time!

First, it was at times frustrating for me that the vision of the book changed in various ways during its progression in response to reviews from other professors and market feedback - I then needed to really re-think how to organize and present the material in a pretty new way. The next time, I'd try to keep a more open and flexible mind early in the process, so that I'd be more willing and ready to accept the changes that need to be made during the process.

Second, I'd try to have better organization! There were certainly points in writing this book in which I had articles and cartoons and chapter drafts in my home study, covering my dining room table, and in my office at work - and thus sometimes it was hard to find the article I needed at a particularly time or figure out what the "latest draft" of a chapter was. So, if I do this again, I'm going to have a better plan for organizing the many materials that accumulate.

Finally, the last question that I want to answer, which I do get asked, is

7. 'Would you write another textbook?'

I have been asked by many people - including other professors and publishers and even my spouse - whether I would write another textbook. And the answer is a definite "maybe" - because it would depend on whether I found another project that really excited me. Writing a book takes a huge amount of time and energy and commitment, and for me, it has been worth it to devote so much to the two books I have written thus far because I was really interested in reading and writing about these topics, which made the projects enjoyable. So, if I found another topic that was equally exciting, I would very

likely be willing to devote the necessary time, energy, and commitment to such an endeavor (but maybe don't mention that to my spouse any time soon!).

I will look forward to hearing your questions and talking more with you about the joys and sorrows of writing an undergraduate textbook.