

## An In-house Textbook Experiment at SQU

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At the beginning of the spring semester of 2001 the Science section of the Intensive English program at Sultan Qaboos University decided to add a teacher-written supplement to the commercial Writing textbook used by Levels 3 (pre-intermediate) and 4 (intermediate). The work was undertaken under the supervision of Director of Curriculum, Tony Parsons, and Levels 3 and 4 Program Coordinator, Anne Gilhooly. I was given release time to produce the supplement in a form ready for the printing press. Another teacher, Deborah Faul, was also given some release time to help with the project.

As in the case of any commercially produced textbook, the one that we were using at that time, *Better Writing* by Richard Harrison, did not do everything that we would have liked. This is not to fault the book. Commercial publications must appeal to a wide and general audience in order to find as many buyers as possible. However, curriculum goals, program objectives and the educational histories and abilities of specific groups of students all tend to narrow and sharpen requirements of any program. For us, *Better Writing* worked in part, but it needed supplementing.

Even before we had used *Better Writing* we had been teaching Writing through the use of text types, or rhetorical functions. So, using the same conceptual and roughly the same organizational approach as *Better Writing*, Deborah wrote a unit on using information from charts and graphs. I wrote units on describing a place, cause and effect and expressing an opinion. Of these, using graphs is already covered in *Better Writing*, but the unit does not use the kind of graphs we thought would be most useful to students at Levels 3 and 4. The other units were written from scratch.

I also wrote several sections intended to be used for practice and reference. Their inclusion was based on what we perceived to be the specific needs of our students and included sections on planning and editing, topic sentences, subject-verb agreement, articles, and shapes and dimensions.

Thus, what was produced at the end of that first semester of the experiment was not a self-contained textbook but a supplement, albeit a substantial one, to *Better Writing*. The Levels 3 & 4 Writing Supplement was printed over the summer by the university printing services and was ready to use for the fall semester of 2001. We found no major problems in using the *Writing Supplement*, but having to bring both the *Writing Supplement* and *Better Writing* to lessons was a challenge for some students.

Our experiment having gone well so far, I was again given time in the spring semester of 2002 to work on the *Supplement*. Deborah Faul had left SQU to return to the U.S. by this time, so I went ahead with the work alone. Much of this work merely involved revisions, but I also added a unit on comparing by using similarities, because *Better Writing* only covers comparing by using differences. Also, I separated the *Supplement* into Level 3 and Level 4 books. Each book, however, contained the same *Practice and Reference* sections.

The two *Supplements* went into use in the fall of 2002. Again, they were well received. What we had at this point, because the way the curriculum is organized, was a Level 3 Writing course

based mainly on *Better Writing* and a Level 4 course base mainly on the *Level 4 Writing Supplement*. So the *Level 4 Writing Supplement* was, in effect, almost a complete textbook.

This semester things have taken a new turn. The *Level 4 Writing Supplement* having demonstrated to us that we can probably produce complete textbooks, we have decided to abandon *Better Writing* in the fall and rely entirely on what we can write ourselves. So I am now writing units to replace the ones in *Better Writing* that we are still using (2 units in Level 3 and 1 in Level 4). We are also removing one of the Level 3 text types and will replace it with one we think our students will find more useful.

I have already mentioned the advantages of supplementing commercial textbooks with in-house material: the specific needs of students, as well as curriculum and program goals can be taken into account. But, having arrived at the point where we know we can write and print complete textbooks, another advantage becomes immediately apparent: cost. At SQU textbooks are given free to students. The books are returned at the end of each level, but after one semester the books are unfit to be used again. So, more books have to be bought. It is obvious that a book written by a teacher on salary, preserved on computer disk and cheaply printed and bound at the university will cost less than a commercial textbook that has to be purchased and repurchased by the thousands every year.

And so we move ahead with our in-house textbook experiment. By the end of this semester Levels 3 and 4 of the Science section of the Intensive English program at SQU will have Writing textbooks produced in-house. They will contain what the curriculum demands they should contain and also what the teachers believe they should contain. And they will be relatively cheap. I have to admit that they will not be especially pretty: no glossy covers, no illustrations by commercial artists but only basic illustrations which are the result of my struggles with Microsoft graphics. But for whom is the visual appeal of commercial textbooks intended? Obviously, if you want to sell a product you must appeal principally to the buyer. Still, clever formatting and eye-catching photographs and graphics must have something to do with student motivation. Possibly, but our students appear to be even more motivated by a product which addresses with precision and thoroughness their specific needs.

Two years ago I took on with trepidation the task of writing a supplement to a course book. Now I find myself confidently fleshing out two textbooks, modest in size but hard-working in page-to-page terms, and, most importantly, useful. I have to say I am pleased.