

Socrates on Program Adoptions

Scene: Plane flying from New York to LA

Characters: Socrates and Henry Baxter, marketing director of a leading educational publishing company

Socrates: In a phrase or sentence how would you describe U.S. publishing?

Baxter: A tough business, particularly with the economy where it is.

Socrates: I notice that your company markets more than one reading program for the elementary grades. Why would you have more than one program?

Baxter: To stay alive. Different districts have different philosophies, particularly with niche populations, like at-risk kids and non-English speakers. Some districts want balanced literacy, some want programs like Reading Recovery. Some want highly structured programs. If you don't have competitive programs for the various potential customers, you don't make sales. If you don't make sales, you don't stay in business very long.

Socrates: But aren't some of the programs you publish better than others?

Baxter: Sure. Some sell well; others don't perform as well as we'd like.

Socrates: I didn't mean how well they sell. I meant are some more effective at teaching students?

Baxter: If we publish them, we consider them to be effective. We have a large development and editorial division that oversees programs being developed and checks on all the quality issues. If they say a program is effective, they ought to know what they're talking about.

Socrates: Do they test core programs before they are published?

Baxter: (chuckles): Duh. Yes, they test core programs.

Socrates: What do they do?

Baxter: I'm not familiar with everything they do, but I know that they spend a lot of time studying how teachers respond to the material. They note exactly what teachers do. What do they look at first? What kind of comments do they make as they thumb through the material? They also have heavy-duty "product discussion seminars" where a group of teachers brainstorm the material, pointing out what they like, what they don't like, how the design might be changed to create more visual appeal, and other issues.

Socrates: This is a marketing investigation. I'm interested in how the students respond to the material.

Baxter: So are they. They ask teachers a battery of questions about what the students will like, what they might not like, and how things could be changed to have more overall appeal to the students and improve motivation.

Socrates: But this is simply their opinion and it may not be valid, particularly if teachers have only a cursory examination of the material and never actually try it out.

Baxter: We believe that teachers can judge the material. After all, they work with students and they are familiar how students respond to different kinds of activities. Also, if they like the material, the chances are better that they may positively influence purchasing decisions.

Socrates: But why don't you test the material and get direct information on how students perform so you can know precisely which details of the program are ineffective and should be changed or dropped before the program is published?

Baxter: That might be something that's possible in Utopia, but not in the real world.

Socrates: Why not?

Baxter: Time. I gather you're not familiar with the adoption process. A quick summary is that districts and states that adopt material on a statewide basis make up a list of "standards" or criteria the new programs must comply with. Like some locusts, this comes up every seven years. We have some hints about new trends that will be emphasized by the new standards, but we don't officially receive the actual standards until 18 months before the final material is to be submitted to the state or district. Do you have any idea of what kind of scrambling and frantic activities have to occur in those 18 months?

Socrates: Tell me.

Baxter: Let's say we have to submit new reading programs for grades K through 5 or 6. That's six or seven levels of material, and there may be 10 or more components on each level. Even if we only have to revise 30% of the material we already have, you're talking about a mountain of new material. But before work begins on it, we have to make up schedules about each step and what the drop-dead deadline is for it to happen. We have to complete business cases that show bottom-line costs for each step of the development operation. Upper management must approve the expenditures before we can start anything. It usually takes weeks to figure out approximate page counts and costs. We also have to figure out how the current program will have to change to make sure we meet every standard, because if we don't, we will spend a lot of time working for nothing. We have to contract with creative houses to help us clarify what the material is to cover, and what particular slant we want. Then the creative house develops the materials. Contracting with solid creative houses is not easy because all the other publishers are swarming over them to get their material in the hopper. When batches of material come back from the creative house, they go through our editorial

department who checks for grammar, style, and equal representation of different groups—male, female, physically handicapped, black, brown, white. They have to make sure that none of the content promotes the taboo topics of Christianity, Christmas or political beliefs. While this is going on, the design department develops and tests new packaging, new looks, new formats. Before submission, we have to present at least roughs of the material to our sales force so they'll be up to speed. And last, but not least, the material has to be printed, which is not easy because the least expensive and reliable facilities in China or wherever are swamped. We may have to wait 6 weeks to get some of the material scheduled. The bottom line is that pre-publication editions of the material must be in the warehouse at least 60 days before the submission to states and districts. In actual practice some material may hit the warehouse 2 days before we submit it. There is not time for any field testing.

Socrates: So you never do any field testing?

Baxter: We have done some in the past for material that doesn't have to be changed much. We ran a 3-month test and another 7-month test.

Socrates: And what did you do with the results of this testing?

Baxter: The obvious. We take the data, write it up, give copies to all our sales representatives and trainers, so they'll be able to show potential purchasers that our product outperforms the competition.

Socrates: But you don't use field testing information to identify weak details of the program and to make changes in the material.

Baxter: How could we possibly do that and meet our production deadlines? Besides, you may not know this, but we are legally prohibited from conducting field tests in some states. Florida is an example. It outlawed any field testing by publishers during the 18-month period

before the submission date. That's the only time we would even have information about what to field test.

Socrates: So if I understand the process, the first time new material is actually tried out with teachers and students occurs after the program has been adopted and in classrooms.

Baxter: That's an unflattering way of putting it, but yes, that's the reality of the adoption process. If we had more time, we could do more testing. But if we're going to be competitive, the unflattering truth is that we have to do a better job than competitors who are handicapped by the same rules we have to follow.

Socrates: But isn't it possible that these rules will result in poor instruction?

Baxter: Poor instruction? No. The truth is that no program will mesh perfectly with different learning styles. The people who make up the standards provide us with the formula about reaching a broader range of learning styles. Our role is to do a respectable job of creating instruction that reaches the broad segment. The rest is up to the teachers and the students.

Socrates: So you don't believe that instructional sequences can be designed so they are capable of teaching all students who have the skills needed to enter the program?

Baxter: Hell no, I don't believe that. I've got evidence in the form of my own kids that there's an enormous difference in learning styles. I have two daughters and a son. He's the youngest. The girls were learning machines through prep school. They just devoured everything the school taught (except math). Their scores on the SAT were around 780 in both reading and writing. My son, who is struggling to go through the same sequence, is a study in frustration. It's not because he doesn't try. He just doesn't have the same kind of learning wheels the girls have.

Socrates: What kind of program did they go through?

Baxter: The best that money can buy.

Socrates: So I gather your children did not go through public school.

Baxter: I live in New York and I don't have great confidence in the local public schools.

Socrates: Were the content-area programs used with your children the ones that your company publishes?

Baxter: No, the girls went through a cultural literacy program, based on E.D. Hirsh's standards. It's tough and the girls had to work hard, but my boy is trying to get through it, and he's just ...lost.

Socrates: And you believe that no program would have been successful with your boy?

Baxter: Damn right I believe it, and I've got the bills to prove it. Right now, he has a tutor every evening for one hour. She is the best, and at \$135 per hour she better be the best.

Socrates: So you believe that your boy's failure is a product of his learning style and is not influenced in any way by the instruction.

Baxter: Here look. He wet the bed until he was five. He's been diagnosed as having hyperactivity, ADD, poor visual acuity, poor visual memory, and low self esteem. He couldn't learn as much about reading in three years as his sisters learned in three months. He's had to have drugs like Ritalin to calm him down. He's just a different kind of animal than his sisters. There's no comparison. And anybody who couldn't see the differences in how these kids learn or try to learn is blind.

Socrates: We're all different, and some of us learn more slowly than others. But there is strong evidence that all children in the normal range learn reading, math and other skills if the instruction is carefully designed.

Baxter: What evidence is that?

Socrates: In neighborhoods with children who typically perform below the 20th percentile, children who go through Direct Instruction reading programs score around the 50th percentile with *all the children* reading by the end of kindergarten.

Baxter: In the first place, I don't believe it. In the second place, if the group scores at the 50th percentile, some of them are above the 50th percentile and some are below. How do you explain the low ones?

Socrates: Individual differences in learning rate. But all of them are reading.

Baxter: Well, you'll never convince me of that.

Socrates: I can show you the data; you're the one who must decide whether it is sound. The data also shows that if the same programs are used properly with classrooms that historically perform in the 50th percentile range, they perform in the 75th percentile range, with only occasional students below the 50th percentile. If your son had been in such a classroom, he almost certainly would have performed above the 50th percentile.

Baxter: I don't know where you're getting this data, but I'm not buying it. Our kids had the best, and if Robbie has problems it's not because he hasn't had quality programs and teachers. Robbie is just Robbie and he learns the way he learns. Period!

Socrates: I understand your position. Getting back to the adoption issues, you indicated that you have the material developed through a creative house. Why do you farm out the development instead of doing it in house?

Baxter: Because it's more cost efficient this way. We can't afford a staff of writers, designers, and artists large enough to keep them on the payroll if they're only going to be needed possibly 2 out of every 7 years. The creative houses are set up so they have or contract with the people

they need.

Socrates: Are all of the writers of material experienced teachers?

Baxter: I don't think so, but they're good writers, and our people read and evaluate everything they write. So, if some of them are not up to snuff, our people will know about it very quickly and work with the creative house to solve the problem.

Socrates: Are all of your editors experienced teachers?

Baxter: No, but they know what good literature is and what motivates students so they're good judges of the quality of the material.

Socrates: How do they judge what motivates students?

Baxter: They compare the offering with what they know to be good literature, clear writing, and topics that students like to read about. If there's a close match, it's good literature. If not it needs to be changed.

Socrates: Wouldn't it be more reliable to present material to students and note how well it motivates them?

Baxter: That may be true, but like I said, they are on a tight schedule and there's no room in it to run to schools and test each piece. We simply have to rely on the editors' judgment. And we have data that their judgment can't be very far off.

Socrates: What is that data?

Baxter: Program sales. Our best reading program captures 11% of the market. Our second best has 6% of the market, and our main niche program has 4%. Those are pretty damn good numbers.

Socrates: I notice that some programs have authors of high-visibility, like Marilyn Adams and Isabel Beck. Are these working authors or do they just lend their names to the programs?

Baxter: I can't speak for all publishers, but when we contract with high-visibility authors, their role is to provide general directions and emphasis. They also read it and give feedback, but they don't do any of

the grunt work.

Socrates: But how could their feedback lead to a superior program if their only basis for expertise comes from reading about results of research, not from the grunt work of teaching successfully or creating successful programs?

Baxter: If the author is an expert in reading, a reasonable assumption is that the author has more technical understanding than an ordinary author.

Socrates: But is that actually the case?

Baxter: I don't know that it's relevant. The program is going to meet adoption standards one way or the other. With a high-profile author, the program provides stronger evidence that it meets the standards.

Socrates: In the past and the present, the adoption standards for states and districts have been unrealistic. I recall that several years ago, one standard called for teaching fractions to kindergarten children. Currently, children in K and 1 may be required to learn very difficult phonemic awareness skills, like adding and deleting consonants. They also have to learn estimation in math, which is difficult to teach without first teaching rounding. How does your company respond to ill-conceived standards?

Baxter: In a straight-forward, non-judgmental way. We try to give districts what their criteria indicate they want. If they want instruction that may strike us as being less sensible than it might be, we don't have much of a choice about what to do other than to give to them what they want. This may not be the best solution from an ideological point of view, but what's the option, to stand in the street with a protest banner and shout about poor standards? That's not going to change anything, except to cost us adoptions we could have been awarded.

Socrates: But shouldn't the system be changed so that publishers

are given valid standards?

Baxter: That's not my bailiwick. I don't know how the system should be configured, and I sure don't conceive of our job as changing it. We're a publisher. We follow the rules and try to do a good job.

Socrates: Richard Feynman wrote a chapter, "Judging Books by their Covers," in which he pointed out some of the attempts publishers made to influence how he voted on their products. He indicated that representatives of one publisher not only offered to take him out for an evening of entertainment, but suggested they could get him laid if he wanted. Does your company try to influence textbook adoptions with bribery?

Baxter: If you're asking whether our sales force is authorized to get people laid, the answer is an emphatic no. If you're asking whether we try to develop a good, long-term relationship with our customers, the answer is yes, but everything is above board, no hanky panky. Some publishers lobby and probably go across the line in trying to influence members of adoption committees. Our approach is simply to view every customer as a potential long-term investment. So we try very hard to treat them as worthy individuals; we listen to what they want—professionally—and we do our level best to see that they're satisfied.

Socrates: Isn't it true that nearly every winter, larger purchasers of your material spend 4 days in Hawaii, with everything paid, and during this time there are only four short sessions, which are accompanied by food, ample refreshments, and entertainment?

Baxter: In the first place, there is nothing illegal or suspicious about the perks we provide. This is a chance for administrators to interact with others from all across the country and not only learn about some of our products, but share problems and solutions with people who face the same reality they have. Also, the setting provides us with the opportunity

to get together with them, one-on-one, and learn how we might better meet their individual needs.

Socrates: And you don't feel that this treatment would influence them to purchase your products, even though they may be inferior to others?

Baxter: That's a very crude way of viewing it. In the first place we don't have "inferior products." In the second place, it's not a sin to establish customer loyalty. We treat our customers as colleagues who we are committed to serve. Of course we want them to turn to us first to meet their instructional needs. That's just good business. But understand that we do it through respect and through solid products, not through bribery or deception.

Socrates: If it is good business, it must have influence on what they buy.

Baxter: Of course it influences them, but not because we take them to nice places, but because these nice places provide us with ample opportunities to learn more about them as individuals and inform them about products that may serve their needs. It's a lot easier to talk to somebody in a comfortable setting than it is in their office while the clock is ticking.

Socrates: Earlier, I referred to the data achieved by Direct Instruction programs like Reading Mastery. Are you familiar with these products?

Baxter: Probably as familiar as I want to be. I understand that most administrators wouldn't consider using them because they dehumanize the teachers by having them follow scripts that tell them verbatim what to say and what to do. These programs even tell teachers when to *pause* when they are giving kids directions. I find that beyond insulting to the intelligence of teachers. I also understand that children are viewed not as

choice makers and comprehenders, but as passive robots, who learn only by rote and who are to respond in unison whenever the teacher snaps her fingers or waves her hand. I see George Orwell written all over this method. The techniques might be appropriate for sheep or even monkeys, but not children.

Socrates: And how would you respond to data that the programs not only out-teach other programs, but motivate children because they are successful, without creating any of the ill effects suggested by your portrayal?

Baxter: I would say two things. First, I don't believe the data. Second, even if I did, I would reject Direct Instruction because I don't believe it could teach anything other than blind compliance while it snuffs out the creativity of children and their teachers.

Socrates: So even if the data showed that DI promotes smarter teachers and smarter students...

Baxter: I would say I want nothing to do with it. And I would also say that I have to read a proposal before we reach LA, so you'll have to excuse me for not continuing this conversation. But thanks for sharing your ideas.