Cultivating a Beginner's Mind: How Textbook Writing Improves Our Undergraduate Teaching

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As coauthors of the eighth edition of a widely used textbook on California politics that was first published in 2008 (Anagnoson et al. 2021), we have learned valuable lessons about how best to approach writing an introductory textbook and how best to work with a relatively large (and shifting) team of coauthors. For those scholars who are considering dipping their toes into these murky waters, this article describes our lessons learned on these two topics.

WRITING AN INTRODUCTORY TEXTBOOK

Academics discuss their areas of expertise with two very different audiences: other experts in their discipline and their students. Via conference papers, symposia, and peer-reviewed scholarship, we probe the nuances of theory, data, and findings. In the classroom, we supplement and interpret assigned readings with the goals of inspiring intellectual curiosity and delivering course learning outcomes. Most professors remember how ill prepared they were for their role of instructor after spending years becoming experts in the minutiae of their dissertation research. Do we tell the usual story about *Marbury* v. *Madison* and the origins of judicial review or delve into the true judicial history as researched by Whittington (2019)? Do we briefly review the typical Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X highlights of the Civil Rights Movement, or do we also lecture about the forgotten Southern Black women who worked in the shadows but nevertheless were crucial to the movement's success, as documented by Barnett (1993)? There simply is so much to teach.

We could spend an entire semester on judicial review, on sexism in the Civil Rights Movement, on the effectiveness of soft power in the international arena—on any number of topics. When we wrote our dissertations, we learned enough material to fill several senior seminars. However, our undergraduate students do not need to know all of that, especially in an introductory-level course. It is too much. Before we can spark our students' interest in the racist roots of the Electoral College system, they need to know what it is and how it works. Before we can lecture about how malapportionment and the filibuster are undemocratic, they need to know that there are 50 states and that each state has two US Senators.

We must begin with the basics, with the understanding that some students come to our classroom knowing almost nothing about the topic. Writing a textbook requires this same approach: a beginner's mind.

The concept of "a beginner's mind" is from Zen Buddhism and refers to not having preconceptions when studying something—that is, to approach the familiar as if we were perpetual beginners (Suzuki 2020). It means having an open, unbiased mind—to be curious, always wanting to learn more (Kaufman 2011).

The process of writing (and revising) a textbook is improved when we take a beginner's-mind approach. We should not assume that we know everything there is to know about a subject. A strong textbook develops from our curiosity to rediscover a topic and research it as if we were new to the subject. Paring down a subject to beginner basics is an excellent reminder of the gap between what we know as academics and the knowledge that our students bring to the classroom. This approach can be difficult when we spend most of our time interacting with peers and conducting research. However, if we jump ahead to the nuances and the tangential details—as we might do in a peer-reviewed academic paper or symposium—textbook readers can be quickly overwhelmed.

One of us recently was reminded of this due to the pandemic-inspired shift to Zoom teaching: it gave students the ability to ask clarifying questions via Zoom's chat function without being embarrassed in front of their peers (e.g., to ask the definition of a word). During a segment on incumbency effects, a private message from a student who asked "What is an incumbent?" was a stark reminder of the need to begin at the beginning.

Lecturing to introductory-level students requires a strategy that is similar to writing a textbook. For most students, this is their introduction to a topic. To write an effective textbook, authors should recall what it is like to be completely unfamiliar with a topic and needing everything explained in accessible language and in easily digested smaller pieces. To have a beginner's mind when writing a textbook is to let go of expertise and to approach subjects assuming that we must learn everything.

This perspective helped in the development of *Governing California in the Twenty-First Century*, recently published in its

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eighth edition, of which we are two of the coauthors (Anagnoson et al. 2021). Writing the textbook taught us several lessons, including the nuances of contract negotiations and coauthoring with a large team. We experienced the difficulty of writing a textbook that must be timeless and cover the basic principles. It cannot include excessive details or descriptions of individual elected officials that require frequent revisions reflecting election results and shifts in underlying political structures.

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Most important, we learned how to write for beginners. Writing for an undergraduate audience is different than writing a journal article or book chapter for professional colleagues. In academia, authors often seek to "wow" colleagues with their insights. However, in a textbook written for first-year (and often first-generation) college students, authors must seek to inform, not to impress. For example, we make extensive use of a four-sentence paragraph structure. This includes a topic sentence that can be **boldfaced** or *italicized*, which conveys to students—as well as instructors, who will read the chapter before they teach but rarely have time to read it as thoroughly as they would a journal manuscript—the most important information. We emphasize simple, straightforward expository text—the type that it is easy to forget how to produce after decades in the profession.

We also know that students tend to not keep their introductory textbooks. After the course ends, many sell it back to the bookstore or to another student, or their rented e-text expires, and thus their access to it. What do we want to leave them with? The basics—fundamental theorems and theories—not the type of content we write in an article for a professional journal.

This does not mean that our textbook is devoid of details or nuance. In some places, by necessity of completely covering a topic, it is mired in details. Other times, we intentionally provide lengthy coverage of a topic to ensure that students are exposed to information that may have been glossed over in their K–12 education, if not omitted entirely. In this era of racial reckoning, we recently bolstered the section of the textbook that discusses the racism in California's history: cycles of violence against Native Americans; Gold Rush–era violence against Mexicans, South Americans, Chinese, and other foreigners, as well as the few free Black Americans in the area whom white miners did not believe were entitled to "their" gold; and the 1871 massacre of Chinese men and boys in Los Angeles, the largest single mass lynching in US history.

Will undergraduate students remember the details of this racist past of the Golden State? Probably not. However, they might remember that there is a racist past and that California's politics are and always have been influenced by the racial diversity of its residents. We cultivate a beginner's mind by encouraging students to rethink their preconceptions about California as a land of egalitarian progressives and to be open to learning something new about the Gold Rush story that may have been whitewashed in their fourth-grade unit only a few years ago.

A related challenge of textbook writing raised by this example is how to lecture about controversial topics. A new feature on monuments commemorating early figures in the history of California (e.g., Catholic missionaries, European explorers, and leaders of the Civil War Confederacy) is another example. Cultivating a beginner's mind when writing about these topics generates material that allows students to see both perspectives of the controversy in such a way that sparks classroom discussion instead of imposing a particular viewpoint. Textbooks devoid of controversy are not compelling reading, but those that approach controversy in a way that seems to take sides can turn students off and stifle classroom debate.

MANAGING A MULTI-AUTHOR TEXTBOOK TEAM

We also learned valuable lessons about how to manage a relatively large team of coauthors and how to address changes to its membership during subsequent editions. After a contract has been signed, all coauthors must unanimously agree to change it. We began writing the first edition in 2008 with an even split among coauthors but, after two or three editions, it became clear that the workloads were not equitable. However, the contract could not be changed without the consent of all seven coauthors, which proved difficult to accomplish. Over

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several editions, the number of coauthors has decreased, but the challenge of negotiating contract revisions remains. A contract provision with a formula that could be adjusted over time, such as payment according to the number of chapters written or revised, would have been preferable. Exacerbating this inequity was the fact that one of the seven original coauthors wrote very little for the first edition and even less for subsequent editions. Without their consent, that coauthor could not be removed from the contract. We encourage other would-be textbook authors to be aware of this possibility and to consider different contract language.

Another lesson we learned concerns royalties. One original coauthor was experienced in negotiating publishing contracts and suggested asking for more than the standard 12.5%. This suggestion was justified by the fact that the share for each of the seven coauthors would be minimal. As is true in all book contracts, authors should consider a publisher's first royalties offer to be negotiable. We succeeded in negotiating a better final offer.

Finally, and most important, is the significant challenge of coordination among coauthors. Ideally, a textbook should avoid overlaps, omissions, and errors. Students and instructors should be able to expect that textbook content is accurate and consistent—after all, it is the textbook. Especially when the writing and revising tasks are divided among coauthors by chapter, the resulting textbook can contain conflicting information and have embarrassing omissions or unnecessary duplication. This is particularly the case after the first or second edition, when coauthors may think that rereading content with which they are already familiar is unnecessary. If some coauthors are less rigorous in their revisions, it can become an increasingly significant problem in subsequent editions.

For every round of writing—including the first and revised editions—coauthors should circulate their chapters for the other team members to review. A designated lead author should be responsible for ensuring a consistent voice and style across chapters and for mitigating potential problems. If any errors survive this process, consider maintaining an errata page at the publisher's website, which also can be available to instructors (and students!) to indicate any errors that were overlooked. The errata page also helps to keep track of corrections to be addressed in the next edition of the textbook.

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A team with numerous coauthors, if managed properly, has the benefits of bringing together a broad range of expertise and generating an informative and well-researched textbook. It also has the benefit of reducing the time commitment of individual coauthors—a precious commodity among academics, even when not trying to survive a pandemic and a shift to Zoom teaching. We hope that those who are considering coauthoring will learn from our missteps and find ways to work together to write great textbooks. ■

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