

See Sherry Speak

Reading more into textbooks

SEXISM/ Are teaching materials teaching sexism?

by Sherry A. Morin

See Beth look at her book. See the page. See a girl. The girl plays house. See the next page. See a boy. See the boy build a model replica of the space shuttle. See Sue close her book. See the teacher speak. See the teacher ask the class about the book. See Beth raise her hand first. See Billy raise his hand. See the teacher call on Billy.

Every woman touched by Canada's educational system has been touched by conventional discrimination. The discrimination comes from government, administrators, instructors, educational materials and the providers of those materials, families, and even students. Discrimination in places of learning isn't as overt as it used to be, but it still exists. Persistent gender roles still leave us predisposed to consider women unequally to men.

On university campuses, discrimination occurs against women in the form of sexual harassment. It also occurs in a different form, which is very seldom challenged; many of the textbooks and learning materials used by Canadian universities are sexist.

A textbook called *The Earth* was used in this university's first-year Geology program from 1990-91. It was edited by Tarbuck and Lutgens, who are both male. Of the

32 "colleagues" who were cited as having contributed to the book, only two weren't male. Of 100 photographs in the book, most depicted landscapes, but 17 of them were pictures of people. Of these 17 photographs, 15 showed males performing scientific, geology-related tasks. One photograph showed a crowd scene containing faceless townspeople, male and female. No photograph in the book depicted a female professional performing technical skills. Besides the crowd scene, only one other photograph in the book showed a sign of a female; She was sauntering idly across a grassy field, intently following after a small child who was apparently in her care. This peasant woman, the only woman pictured in the book, served as an arbitrary decoration. Is this the message that should be visually conveyed in science textbooks? After examining *The Earth* I would say that a picture is not worth a thousand words; on the contrary, it is worth only two words - gender roles. Ironically, the book's editors had dedicated it "To our students, who have been our best teachers." Let's hope that geology students start alerting their professors to what makes a fair textbook.

Students of all faculties should be concerned with this issue. Photographs, or visual images, are the world's most quickly communicated, non-verbal form of communication. We depend heavily on sight as part of our learning processes,

and thus in our formation of attitudes. "Humans are primarily visual animals. We gather most of our information about the world through our eyes and... we often think and reason by using visual images and symbols." This is according to *Psychology* by Crider & Goethals.

Crider and Goethals are aware of the impact that visual images and symbols can have on us. Therefore, it is deeply disappointing that they, and so many other colleagues of theirs in the field of psychology, have managed to reinforce gender stereotypes in psychology textbooks. In photographs depicting the relationship between therapist and client, psychology textbooks most often show males as psychologists and females as the helpless recipients of their treatment.

What makes this subtle and gradual conditioning a threat to gender-neutral thinking patterns? Suppose that a student's perceptions of women have been molded by his or her exposure to a certain textbook's photographs. The effects of this conditioning have led the student to believe, say, that women are less competent than men at competitive careers. If, later on in life, such a student should be placed in a position where he or she hires women, the women would probably not have a fair chance at being hired, regardless of their qualifications.

An interesting way to examine the problem of sexism in textbooks

is to look over one of your own. Better yet, to see really shocking and striking examples of sexism, pick up a textbook that was used in this university before the 1960's. Many of these obsolete editions are stockpiled in the Harriet Irving Library.

When you're examining a textbook for underlying attitudes, there are a few guidelines that you might follow. If your textbook is an edited compilation of many authors' works, how many of the contributing authors were male, and how many female? Were the editors themselves all male? With respect to photographs and gender roles, how many women appear as office secretaries, waitresses, or prostitutes, while the men appear as doctors, police officers or entrepreneurs? In other words, does the book depict men in positions of authority more often than women? What are the women wearing? Do they appear in tight-fitting clothing out of context? For example, if a business textbook prints a sexist beer ad as a "sample advertisement" in its section on advertising, there is a good chance that the book is sexist. So-called "gender-neutral" language is never, in itself, a reliable indicator of whether or not a textbook is gender-fair. Many writers will take pains to polish their work for technical gender fairness when most of the actual content in the book actually ignores or degrades women.

The most shocking example of sexism that I have ever stumbled across came to my attention this year, in a book called *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations*. Its name gives away the subject matter of the book. That is why I was shocked to find a passage, on page 355, that read, "I look at my wife snoring next to me with two pounds of make-up smeared all over her face... My secretary will be consoling, always

The fact that such misogynic comments appeared in a business book on corporate activity is offensive in itself. The fact that R.J. Barnet's book, *Global Reach*, appears on the reading list for one of this university's courses is even more offensive. The book is ostensibly a study of corporate domination, particularly during the 60's, the decade of change. Women's plight under corporate domination is entirely ignored.

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If you ever read anything for a course that's disturbing, questionable or objectionable, approach your professor about it. Ask questions. Discuss the problem. If you don't feel it's been given adequate attention, don't give up until you get the answers you want.

That's it for this week, kiddies. See me speak again in three weeks.

What constitutes Sexual Harassment?

All Brunswickan staff members are urged to attend a presentation on sexual harassment in the workplace. The presentation will be held on March 9, Tuesday in room 203 of the SUB.

Time: 6:00 pm



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PUBLIC FORUM ON THE QUALITY OF STUDENT LIFE

The Task Force on the Quality of Student Life, Fredericton Campus, will be holding an open forum to hear views of the University community on any matter relating to the Quality of Student Life.

DATE: Monday, 15 March 1993 TIME: 5:30-7:30 p.m.

PLACE: Council Chambers (Room 103), SUB

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