During the many years that I have taught classes from the elementary to the graduate level, I've had the opportunity to observe various instructor approaches as well as student reactions to the use of textbooks. This investigation, along with my own classroom experience, has helped strengthen my approach to textbooks in a way that maximizes my students' interest and learning. The following are two composite sketches that summarized my observations:

Two fourth grade teachers conducted a social studies lesson. Both assigned an in-class reading from the textbook as a follow up to a lesson. Both classes had the same reading level and were reading the same textbook.

One teacher, Mr. Gates (a pseudonym), instructed his students to open to the pages related to their research project but did not address textbook format. The other teacher, Ms. Rodriguez (also a pseudonym), similarly instructed her students to open to the appropriate pages, but first conducted a discussion about the manner in which information was presented in the textbook. She called her students' attention to text features and characteristics such as advance organizers, font size/white space, bold and italicized words, illustrations, and general textbook appeal. She prepared her students to better understand the material that was presented.

When the students in Gates's class complained that the book was too difficult, he exhorted them to push ahead because, as he told them, “You have the ability and can do the job. You just need to try your best.” Rodriguez, however, heard few complaints about the difficulty of the book; the students in her class felt confident that they could successfully read the textbook and complete the assignment. The students in Gates's class were not as confident and were often off task. Some even closed their books and placed their heads on their desks, as if to sleep. Later in the day, Gates complained to Rodriguez about his class's poor attention span during the lesson despite his efforts to motivate them with encouraging words. He explained to Rodriguez that he generally enjoys his students, but he complained that they could be lazy and not interested in reading from a social studies textbook, even though they had the ability to read the material.

Both Gates and Rodriguez are licensed in social studies and are popular with their students. But while Gates appeared to be providing greater motivation through his words of encouragement, the actions of Rodriguez created a stronger motivation where it counted—among the students of her class. Gates did not anticipate his students' negative perspective of the textbook, and he did not address students' expressed discomfort with the assigned pages. His students were distracted by the nuances of the text and this became a barrier to their engagement with the textbook and the assignment.

A number of researchers have identified a connection between student performance and the nature of a textbook; these experts have suggested ways to help students negotiate the textbook and improve comprehension. Authors Rhonda Tyree, Thomas Fiore, and Rebecca Cook noted, “Textbooks are even blamed for children's apathy toward and dislike of subject matter.”¹ In the scenarios described above, however, it may not necessarily have been the textbook that was problematic, but students' perceptions of the textbook. Albert Harris and James Sipay warn, “Reading comprehension can be influenced by the ways in which the textual information is presented by the author”;² and, in addressing the needs of learning disabled students, Marilyn J. Chambliss stated, “Teaching students with a learning disability strategies for reorganizing paragraph information or for capitalizing on text structure has been shown to significantly increase their reading comprehension.”³ In addition, Jeffrey Bakken, Jeanne Harms and Lucille Lettow, Brenda Moustafa, and Richard Sinatra suggested activities that have improved comprehension by focusing on textbook format.⁴ In the case of Rodriguez and Gates, it is informative to examine Rodriguez's instructional procedure to understand how she was able to achieve and sustain a higher level of student motivation.
Rodriquez's theory of the role of self-efficacy in motivation provides a framework for understanding the students' behavior in the scenarios above. Self-efficacy is the degree of certainty that one has that he or she can accomplish a given task; it is a predictive judgment, not a performance measure. Self-efficacy is one influence on motivation. (Another influence is the perceived personal value of a task. Some individuals who perceive they have the ability to successfully complete a task—high self-efficacy—may choose not to become involved because the goal is inherently meaningless to them. An example would be a ninth grader having little or no interest in a book popular with and appropriate for first graders; reading such a book would probably have little value to the ninth grader.)

In Bandura's model, there are four sources of self-efficacy: (1) enactive mastery; successful involvement in the task; (2) vicarious experiences, observing how others achieve; (3) verbal persuasion, hearing from a respected mentor that one has or is developing the ability to achieve; and (4) physiological or affective state, bodily or psychological (mood) feedback accompanying the task. In this framework individuals consciously or subconsciously integrate feedback from these four sources to varying degrees, thus affecting their level of self-efficacy for an anticipated task. While all four sources of self-efficacy are important, according to Bandura, "Enactive mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed." 

In the scenarios above, Rodriguez provided her students with enactive mastery experiences because she helped them understand the purpose and value of specific text features; unfortunately, Gates neglected this important pedagogical step as she gave his class its assignment. Because Rodriguez made her students aware of text features, they were more confident that they could successfully read and learn from the textbook than Gates's students. Rodriguez's activities led to greater student self-efficacy for completing the reading assignment than Gates's verbal encouragement. A more detailed description of Rodriguez's instructional techniques follows. The techniques are enumerated according to textbook feature addressed, not listed in priority or importance.

1. **Advance Organizers.** Similar to using a map for planning a trip, advance organizers highlight important information for the reader's convenience. David Ausubel reports that information presented in summary form prior to reading the total material enhanced comprehension and retention. He calls such material an "advance organizer" because it helps the reader organize his or her schema about the topic prior to the actual reading. An advance organizer that enables the reader to correctly anticipate content enhances motivation for reading that specific material because it allows the reader to feel confident that he or she now knows some of the information to be presented in the text.

Rodriguez made her students aware of advance organizers in the textbook by drawing their attention to the "Before You Read" feature of each chapter. She explained that this section of the textbook gave them the "big ideas" about or summarized what they were going to read. In order to ensure that her students understood the function of the "Before You Read" section, she had them sit in small groups for an activity designed to encourage anticipatory thinking using an "advance organizer." She then gave her students a teacher-made activity page copied from another similar textbook; the rest of the page was blank. Rodriguez directed her students to first discuss and then to write what they thought might follow the "Before You Read" summary section (an advance organizer) copied from another similar textbook. The rest of the page was blank. Rodriguez directed her students to first discuss and then to write what they thought might follow the "Before You Read" summary section. She then had them locate and read two other "Before You Read" sections in the pages assigned that day.

2. **Bold/Italicized Print.** Often an author uses bold or italicized print within the context of a passage to draw attention to the importance or initial use of a word. An example might be the first time the word "bicameral" is used or when it is followed by an explanation.

Rodriguez identified these words for her students, and told them to first scan the chapter for other italicized or bold words before doing the assigned reading. She encouraged them to try to determine the meaning of each word using the context, but asked that they might also use the glossary if the meaning was not clear. Words highlighted in this manner were discussed and their meanings clarified prior to the actual reading. This allowed her students to avoid frustration as a result of repeatedly interrupting their reading to "look up" a word. Since Gates did not do this, his students often were seen turning pages and asking each other what certain words meant. Despite Gates's words of encouragement, his students became frustrated and, as a result, strayed off task.

3. **Type Size/White Space.** Some students may feel that the material to be read is below or above their level of sophistication or reading ability because of inappropriate type size and/or white space. Upper elementary readers are reminded of material typical of the early elementary grades when they see words with relatively large letters. For other readers at various grade levels, words made up of letters smaller than what they are used to may be intimidating. In both cases, the effect of letter size may result in the reader's conscious or subconscious decision to become engaged in the task. Just as some proficient adult readers overlook the "fine print" in various documents such as insurance policies and credit card agreements, so too do some school-aged children have an unfavorable response to inappropriate type size. A mismatch between the reader's subconscious expectations of type size and that of the textbook may exacerbate a feeling of low self-confidence, causing the reader to decide not to expend the energy to read.

Similarly, adequate white space, such as in the margins and borders, prevents visual fatigue; minimal white space, however, creates visual density that tires some readers. In general, white space in reading material decreases as grade level increases, and a textbook that has too much or too little white space may hinder comprehension for some students. As a result, a reader

---

**September 2003**

275
intimidated by a lack of white space may choose not to become engaged in reading the assigned textbook, or may no longer choose to read material for pleasure or for his or her own edification.

Although textbook type size and white space cannot be changed, Rodriguez was able to alleviate the stress associated with reading a lengthy amount of small print by restructuring the reading assignment while still seeking to accomplish the same goals as Gates. Rodriguez divided the assignment into smaller, more manageable sections, each with an objective related to the overall lesson goal. Another technique she used was to ask her students to place an index card both above and below the selected text; this she did to reduce any sense of intimidation among her students caused by a large quantity of small print in a relatively limited space. Retyping the information using a larger type size or scanning the pages and then enlarging the type would also have resolved the problem, but this may not always be practical.

4. Proximity of Illustrations to Related Text. Authors of social studies textbooks frequently use illustrations to supplement written explanations and to clarify concepts. This includes charts, maps, and graphs. However, the value of an illustration decreases as the distance from its related verbal explanation increases. Turning one or two pages (in either direction) to view an illustration is less pedagogically sound than having an illustration on the same page as the text. When illustration and related text are separated, the reader is expected to remember one or many ideas while glancing at additional, perhaps distracting, text located on subsequent or previous pages. This may be further complicated when multiple illustrations appear on a page and readers are forced to read headings or labels to match an illustration with the related text. At the very least, page turning becomes an interruption for the reader who is attempting to understand the information on a given page. This is especially true when that individual is an at-risk reader with a history of feeling frustration when reading textbooks.

Rodriguez anticipated this problem and minimized its effect by making copies of illustrations for each reader. When the text referred to an illustration, her students did not have to turn pages because they could easily view their personal copies. Gates's students had to continuously turn pages and expressed annoyance at having to look through the textbook for the illustration cited.

5. Textbook Appeal. Outdated social studies books with pages missing or books that have been defaced give students the impression that the information within the textbook is not held in high esteem.

Unfortunately, the textbooks used in Gates and Rodriguez's school were old and had been used for many years by numbers of students. The books had mostly black print on white pages, and contained outdated illustrations and photographs. Rodriguez told her class, "The textbook you are about to read is old and contains many outdated pictures and photographs, but it does contain valuable information. Use this book to complete your assignment, but let's also think about other, more interesting illustrations that could be included to make this book more up to date." The students had many suggestions for improvement. Gates simply apologized to his students for the unappealing textbook.

In 1987, Bonnie Armbruster, Richard C. Anderson, and Joyce Ostertag documented lack of motivation as one of the areas affecting the reading of content area material.8 To combat this, social studies teachers at all levels should not only be knowledgeable in their content area, but should also be aware of how to present textbook material in the optimum manner to enhance student motivation. This is consistent with the standards for teacher education promulgated by National Council for the Social Studies, in particular Programmatic Standard 3.1 (Substantial Instruction in Academic Areas within the Social Studies Field), and Programmatic Standard 3.2 (Course or Courses on Teaching Social Studies, which includes "... strategies, and techniques for teaching social studies at the appropriate licensure level.").9 These call for demonstrated competence in social studies content as well as pedagogy.

While Gates's students complained that the text was too hard, Rodriguez's students made no such complaint. Gates's students also expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to understand the text. Because Rodriguez's students noted the characteristics of the text that they were about to read, they developed positive self-efficacy—a "can-do" attitude—for the research assignment, and became engaged in the reading. Although equally capable, Gates's students did not develop a strong sense of self-efficacy because, based on their first look at the assigned pages, they anticipated problems reading the material. When presented with a book that contained minimal white space, numerous illustrations, italicized print, what students perceived as "extra" reading in the "Before You Read" sections, and an old copyright date, many of Gates's students chose not to become engaged in the assignment. Since they were not prepared for the manner in which the content was presented, they became distracted by and ultimately discouraged by text characteristics that were unfamiliar or unexpected. This, in turn, led the students to have a low level of self-efficacy and, ultimately, a lack of motivation.

Knowledge of the topography of the text provided Rodriguez's students with the confidence that they could accomplish the reading assignment without getting distracted by particular characteristics of the text. Although Rodriguez did not explicitly encourage her students to "try their best," her instructional procedures were, in fact, more motivational than Gates's words of encouragement. She provided her students with opportunities for "enactive mastery" related to potential problem aspects of the text; unfortunately for his students, Gates failed to do this. When concerned about student self-efficacy and the achievement of academic goals, educators should identify problems inherent in the class textbook and then implement an activity or activities to minimize the effect of potential problems.

In summary, when planning instruction, the social studies teacher should not focus exclusively on important academic objectives (including knowledge of text format), but should also attend to and nurture the development of student self-
efficacy. When a teacher understands critical elements or processes inherent in developing motivation, he or she is better prepared to react to the problem of unengaged students. Rather than dismiss unengaged students as lacking motivation, a more effective approach is to identify and evaluate some of the processes involved in motivation. In the scenarios above, Gates was not successful in involving his students in the assignment because he did not address the enactive mastery component of self-efficacy in his teaching; Rodriguez was more successful with her students because she did.

Notes
2. Albert Harris and James Sipay, How To Increase Reading Ability (New York: Longman, 1990), 562.
6. Ibid., 80.

Patrick P. McCabe is associate professor of Literacy Methodology in the Graduate Literacy Program at St. John’s University in Jamaica, New York. He teaches doctoral and master’s degree students, and has published articles in content area literacy development, self-efficacy, and text format. Dr. McCabe has taught at the elementary, secondary, junior college, undergraduate and graduate levels. He can be contacted at mccabep@stjohns.edu.