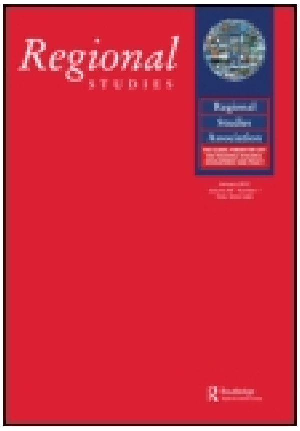

Regional Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cres20

Why write textbooks?

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Published online: 23 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Susan M. Roberts & Andrew Wood (2013) Why write textbooks?, Regional Studies, 47:9, 1609-1611, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2013.843769

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2013.843769

Moreover, a major reason for writing a book, despite the time and hardship, is the personal satisfaction of having plumbed a subject to the depths and having made a serious contribution to the process of knowledge-making (even if one is ultimately proved wrong). The labour process matters, not merely in the usefulness of the commodity, but in the value we put on it – a value that goes beyond exchange, 'measurables' and money. This is true, by the way, for any significant product, whether a beautiful piece of furniture, an elegantly designed iPhone, or simply a good meal cooked at home for friends.

I have to add that the book-as-object matters to the writer, as well. Alienation is not just a negative process of 'objectification' of labour; in fact, objectification is part of the point. That beautiful object in hand, when one gets the first copy off the presses, is a reward in itself, a symbol of the achievement. But more than that, the book as object can circulate to colleagues, friends and strangers, carrying the contribution with it. It can create new connections, new opportunities for the author, as well as for readers, in its travels; and it can outlast the author to keep on being productive for others. What makes this less alienated than factory work is that the author's name is on a book (though the reality of the publisher's control can show up in many tawdry ways).

Finally, the book *qua* object is satisfying to readers, as well. This is not just about the ego and fame of the author who, after all, loses control of the text as it circulates. While the 'object' may be as minimal as the electronic scribbles on an e-reader, books still get read in huge numbers today, and that practice is not going away even as the digital young have shorter attention spans and lose the habit of reading. How many times do you hear a friend or colleague say that she just loves the 'feel' of the book in her hand or the possibility of passing a good book along to someone else? Books are here to stay, even as the world of scholarship, publishing, writing and reading swirls into new constellations. Go read or write a good one, and you will see why.

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Why write textbooks?

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There are likely many effective ways to introduce students to economic geography. Whether it is through a careful explication of location models; a treatment of key actors such as firms or consumers; a discussion of different types of economic spaces (industrial clusters, shopping malls, financial centres, and so on); a consideration of the relations and value chains linking and differentiating spaces (countryside and city, the European Union and its neighbours, the Global North and South, and so on); or perhaps case studies about the local and regional economies with which students are familiar. Probably most instructors of economic geography use a mixture of avenues into the core material. Likewise, there are any number of possibilities for structuring an economic geography course. And there is a wide variation in the thematic emphases of economic geography courses – with globalization serving as one especially popular key theme over the past two or three decades.

The kinds of decisions instructors make about how best to teach their material are, unsurprisingly, made with attention to the particular characteristics of the students taking the course. Each instructor of economic geography is likely sensitive to the background and context of her or his students. Are they advanced students who have taken a suite of human geography and/or economics courses, or will this be their first encounter with human geography? Are the students majoring in geography, or are they taking economic geography as part of a different curriculum (international studies, business or whatever)? Are the students from the locale in which the institution offering the course is located, or are they drawn from far and wide? Are the students typically well-prepared for a social science course at the university level, or do they typically need assistance in their studies? And so on.

Each of us who teaches regularly has no doubt considered these questions among many others as we ponder how best to organize our courses. Ultimately, the issue is how best to connect with students' experiences and understandings of the world. What techniques and materials can we employ to bring alive a curiosity about matters considered to be part of economic geography. Then, how can students' learning be effective and meaningful? This is not to suggest that every economic geography student needs (or wants) to see an immediate and literal 'pay off' from their economic geography course(s), in terms of some directly applicable analytical techniques, say. This may be appropriate for some students in some institutional contexts, but more generally students should be able to see how economic geography enhances their understanding of aspects of the world around them, how it expands their intellectual horizons, and how it challenges and stimulates them as thinkers.

Given the necessary and appropriate plurality of context-specific approaches to teaching economic geography it is, in our view, highly positive that there is a diverse set of current textbooks available to instructors. One size cannot fit all. When we set out to craft our own contribution to this expanding bookshelf, we sought to make a distinctive contribution to the field, but also explicitly to acknowledge the diversity that is economic geography (Wood and Roberts, 2011). However, in reflecting on the contemporary diversity of the field, the limits of the textbook form become clear. As scholars, each of us has our own research agenda that we have sought to pursue through the conventional route of research projects, conference presentations, graduate training and academic outputs. While our textbook reflects this work – with its emphasis on the various inequities that structure economic life and why those inequities arise – a textbook is not the best vehicle to further any particular research agenda. Rather than cling to and extend a particular approach we sought to recognize the diversity of economic geography. And diversity is more than the range of concrete examples and cases described in the book. While pitched in accessible terms, we have also sought to explore the diversity of epistemologies and methods through which key thinkers in the field have sought to understand the geographies of economic life. In truth, the tension between promoting our own ways of understanding the world while acknowledging the range of alternatives was a difficult path to navigate.

Inescapably, the textbook we wrote reflects our own experiences and contexts which have been largely in the Anglo-American realm. Thus, the issues we discuss and the examples we employ are more likely to be familiar and of interest to students in these parts of the world. Again, our textbook reflects the traditions and contexts in which we have studied and worked. However, the themes of our book – places, networks and flows – are at once grounded and abstract. That is, we hope that students and instructors can see how these and related conceptual elements such as the tension between fixity and mobility, or relations among economic actors, or the spatial nature of economic practices and forms can be useful in approaching a wide range of phenomena in quite different contexts.

The textbook can provide a template that enables an instructor to take particular concepts or ideas – such as the 'transnational firm' – and deploy the concept through examples familiar to the particular students in the course. In this way concepts provide a key bridge between the broad theoretical frameworks or schools of thought that animate much contemporary academic debate in economic geography with the routine news and events that comprise the daily lives of students enrolled. Focusing on concepts also provides a middle ground that can be used to track the rise (and fall) of particular themes or ideas. Furthermore, certain concepts provide economic geographers with a way of travelling between different geographic scales of interest. Uneven development provides a particular case in point; encouraging students to think through the changing fortunes of local and regional economies along with the identification and understanding of the global inequities that pervade economic life.

Writing a textbook was satisfying in a number of different ways. Collaboratively thinking through how best to explain and illustrate this or that issue of interest, and identifying robust and timely data to depict key trends were fun and thought-provoking tasks. Writing the book also provided an opportunity to think hard about the history of the discipline – from its origins, through the different phases of its development to its current (and possible future) trajectory. Once again that history reflects the particular contexts within which ideas and theories emerge and, in our case, the changing fortunes of ideas and claims provides fodder with which to challenge students to think differently about the world.

A common criticism of textbooks is that they date very quickly. On the one hand, this is a problem that can be dealt with by instructors. With the sources of all data made clear, the most recent versions of particular information can usually be easily accessed and the picture updated. On the other hand, step-changes in the organization of economic life are harder to address. Certainly, the 2008 economic recession that has been felt in many parts of the world (albeit quite differently) has prompted a reorganization of key markets that even books such as ours (sent to the publishers in 2010, appearing in 2011) have not really addressed. It would be possible, of course, for publishers to support a textbook format that could more easily be responsive to these challenges, as is done for some high-volume North American markets in introductory human and physical geography, by hosting much of the materials on the web.

To conclude, the main motivation for writing a textbook in our case was to try to present economic geography in a way that made the field compelling and engaging for students. Writing the book has certainly encouraged us to think long and hard about our field and not least the various ways in which the ideas and frameworks with which we work can be mobilized to encourage students to think critically about the world around them. It also provides a way of identifying and specifying the limits of the ideas. At the end of our book we wrote:

> We hope that this book has stimulated you to think about how the economic practices you see and participate in every day are part of wider social relations.
>
> (p. 162)

For us the textbook provides one among a number of mechanisms through which we can strive to enable students to think critically about the world and its prospects.

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Why Edit Books? In Defence of an Oft-Disparaged Academic Activity

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> Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.
> (Helen Keller, American social reformer, 1880–1968)

Of all the different forms of research and writing, producing an edited book is often regarded as the least significant type of academic activity, and certainly as having the lowest priority in building an academic career. Writing chapters for edited books is viewed by many as an equally dubious endeavour. The arguments are well-rehearsed: edited books (and the chapters they contain) are not peer-reviewed, and therefore are not subject to 'academic quality control'; the editor(s) get the credit – if such there be – for a publication based on the efforts of others (the various contributors); edited books (and the chapters that have been written for them) lack the potential impact and visibility of authored books and journal articles; time spent on putting edited books together (or indeed writing chapters for such volumes) would be better directed at building up a curriculum vitae based on papers in leading, high-citation-impact journals. The message is clear, particularly within the circles of academic promotion boards, staff appointment panels and research assessment bodies (such as the British Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK): edited books do not count for much. It is as if they should carry a sort of 'academic health warning'.

But is this necessarily or always true? Is there intellectual snobbery at work here? As someone who has edited several books over the years, and written many introductions to, and chapters for, such books, I would argue that this form of academic activity can be just as demanding and influential as writing books and journal articles. To be sure, the sort of criticisms listed above sometimes do apply. But just as there are indifferent and low-impact edited books, so too there are many indifferent and low-impact authored books and innumerable instantly forgettable journal articles. Much depends of course on the nature and quality of the edited book in question. For one thing, there are different types of edited book, serving different purposes. At one end of the genre are the collections of previously published 'landmark' articles (sometimes edited down to shorter versions) brought together as subject 'readers', and which often include introductions and commentaries written by the editor(s). These volumes can provide useful surveys of the intellectual development of a field, especially for undergraduates. But they can be arduous to compile, sometimes involving considerable dialogue with the original authors and publishers over copyright and related issues – as was the case with five-volume series *Critical Concepts in Economic Geography* (2007) that I co-edited with Peter Sunley.