



The Textbook Life, By An Author

Interview with Dr. Laura Berk

**For podcast release
Monday, June 27, 2022**

KENNEALLY: When Dr. Laura Berk began writing her first textbook on child development, her work followed her home from the classroom at Illinois State University. There was research and writing to do, of course, and there were her own children to care for and learn from. At the time, the early-career professor had two young sons, then ages 8 and 11.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

In May, SAGE Publishing's US college division announced a new author/publisher partnership with Dr. Berk, distinguished professor emerita in the department of psychology at Illinois State University. SAGE now becomes the exclusive publisher of Berk's bestselling titles. Together, the textbooks are considered an essential resource on human development from infancy to adolescence and into adulthood. Dr. Berk joins me now from Chicago, Illinois. Welcome to the program, Dr. Berk.

BERK: Thank you, Chris, for inviting me on the program.

KENNEALLY: We're delighted you can join us, Dr. Berk. Your textbooks are widely adopted by instructors and much praised by them and their students. Over time, you've created a body of work that is still evolving. You're currently working on revised editions of your major titles, starting with *Infants, Children, and Adolescents* in the 10th edition, which will come out in the second half of 2023 next year. I'd like to look back on your career as a textbook author as well as look ahead, and I suppose the place to start is at the beginning, that picture I painted in the introduction. What motivated you to write your first textbook, and what did you hope to accomplish?

BERK: Chris, it was an extended process of becoming. I've been writing child development texts now for over 30 years, lifespan development texts for over 20 years. And as for how it began, I think when I reached mid-career, I sought a wider reach than was afforded by the research articles, book chapters, and course assignments reflected on my vitae. I wished to just reach more students, more faculty.



So I had passing thoughts of writing a child development text, and I was inspired by the fact that my own undergraduate professor in my first child development course, Paul Mussen at UC Berkeley, had written a leading textbook of that time, and that served as a model and inspiration for me. I'd also had sufficient experience in the classroom by mid-career to have begun to think about ways theory and research could be presented and explained that were more interesting and compelling to students. And I had as a young person developed a passion for writing that was nurtured by my father, who in his spare time wrote short stories, poetry, essays for fun, and was also nurtured by demanding and inspiring teachers. I was an English major before I became a psychology major as an undergraduate.

So as it happened, when I returned from a sabbatical leave at UCLA, an acquisitions editor dropped into my office, and he boldly asked me, had I ever considered writing a child development text? Three months later, I signed my first publishing contract and embarked on a three-year journey of writing that first textbook.

KENNEALLY: Well, with a subject like the human being and with a field, as you said, that is changing so much and so fast, with such an enormous amount of material, how does an author of a textbook like the ones you wrote know when to start writing? You could research for your whole career before writing a word, couldn't you?

BERK: That's part of the self-discipline. You have to stop. But one of the challenges I found was really the daunting task of becoming a sufficient generalist knowledgeable enough in different domains of the field to write competently about them. I had to develop a framework, a structure for writing about files that I discovered I knew a lot less about than I thought. I wasn't a specialist in emotional development. I wasn't a specialist in moral development, gender development, peer relations, and so on. Even if I had been, I probably would not have been familiar with the breadth of those fields to be able to give students a knowledgeable and recent introduction to them.

So I solved the task by starting with the *Handbook of Child Psychology*. It was the compendium in the field. I believe it was the fourth edition. It was written by Paul Mussen, my model from my undergraduate days who taught my first course – or it was edited by him, I should say. And I began to read those chapters so that I could ground myself in the diverse domains of child development. My first text was a topically organized text. And from there, I engaged in literature searches on many topics, combing the literature for what I believed to be the most influential and important findings.

KENNEALLY: So what are students today expecting from instructional textbooks, and how have their expectations changed over time?



BERK: Well, one thing that I think they're expecting is a textbook that's not too expensive, (laughter) although that isn't under my control. I think we've made progress more recently in bringing the cost of textbooks under control.

The other thing I think students expect is a coherent, compelling, interesting, integrated narrative. There's always a challenge in getting students to read their textbooks. Everybody continually talks about it – to get students to read the assignments and so forth. Of course, many of them live quite busy lives. But we have to, I think as authors, ask why is this a continual challenge? We probably have to begin by convincing students of the importance of reading, because the more they read, even if they may get it in class, the more they'll be able to comprehend, synthesize, and apply the content. And reading is going to help them with their writing skills, with developing critical thinking skills, and all of that is going to prepare them for their career, graduate school, and so forth.

KENNEALLY: We think about the importance of keeping up with technology, but of course, society has changed a great deal in the decades that you have been writing about child development. I understand that you were one of the first authors to include LGBTQIA+ children in texts like these. Why was that important to you?

BERK: Perhaps I was the first. I've never been very conscious of that, as I am of the importance of representing diversity, of representing culture and social and health issues facing children and their families and the developing adult as well, the reason being the dramatic impact of these contextual factors on development. The US, I think, is undergoing unprecedented change in ethnic/cultural diversity. It's vital that we authors represent that on virtually almost every page of our text. It's also important that we represent it in illustrations for students. I think students are expecting to find discussions in the text they can relate to. They want to see themselves and their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the text. And they want to see images that look like themselves. They should expect that, and we have a responsibility to deliver on that.

With respect to LGBTQ, I included in my titles early on evidence on development of kids in lesbian and gay families, of development of gender minority children, on lesbian and gay parents and child-rearing, and on lesbian and gay adults. As the research appeared, I felt a strong responsibility to include it. More recently, we have an increasing body of research on transgender children, and I have included that in the last couple of editions of my texts. So it's a high priority for me, and I plan to pay serious attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion of all kinds. We can't really understand development without doing that.

KENNEALLY: Textbook publishing is big business, Dr. Berk. You already alluded to that. It's a big business for publishers. It's a big business for authors like yourself. Tell us about



the move to SAGE. I understand that there is a commitment at that publisher to supporting teaching and learning in social and behavioral sciences. They specialize in those fields, of course. Was that important to you? What was behind the decision to bring your books to SAGE?

BERK: Why the move? At the outset, I can say it's highly unusual for an author to change publishers – extremely rare to have that opportunity, if it's the right word for it. I think increasingly, my previous publisher and I were parting ways in terms of values and priorities, and that's despite being with that publisher for over 20 years, ever since it purchased the textbook list from the company with which I had originally signed the titles. I felt there was no choice but to exit and to sever those ties.

Textbook authors spend a lot of time working in an office by themselves and not much time communicating with other authors. So I questioned whether I would and could find a new suitable home for my titles, given I didn't know whether what I had seen and experienced pervaded the entire industry. And it was being introduced – my introduction to SAGE during a series of discussions with their key editorial managers in which I was just very, very impressed with SAGE's steadfast commitment to high-quality content, excellent writing, first-rate pedagogy. All of that was very apparent to me. We had such common values. I have to say signing with a publisher is somewhat like getting married. (laughter) And I felt such a commonality of purpose with SAGE.

SAGE has had an extraordinary ability to immediately spring into action and release four of my existing titles in July in preparation for fall courses, and all of these factors made a tremendous difference. I appreciated so much SAGE's executive leadership – its CEO, its VP of college publishing – getting in touch and assuring me that above all else, SAGE is a publishing company devoted to creating the very best higher education content. So that's how the new marriage occurred.

KENNEALLY: Finally, Dr. Berk, any advice for other academics who are seeking success as textbook authors?

BERK: I have a few suggestions, perhaps questions for them to ask themselves if they're considering becoming a text author. I think all successful textbooks start with a vision, a mission. It stems generally from teaching insights, knowledge of the discipline, a sense of how to improve on texts that exist. So I think, ask yourself about what is that vision, and how clear is it for you and the prospective publisher?

How will two or three years of working on a text in a large market fit into your personal life? You mentioned my two sons. I had moments where I wondered, was this the right decision? They were quite young when I began writing my first textbook.



I think it's important to ask yourself, am I a strong writer? Can I write with clarity, liveliness, freedom from unnecessary jargon, distilling information into more accessible forms without sacrificing accuracy and rigor? And can I include compelling examples, both from personal experience and from elsewhere as well? So it's important – can you write in a way that makes a text purposeful, useful, memorable?

And finally, I suggest that they ask themselves, do you have a passion for learning? That's one of the great gratifications of writing a text is to see your field in all of its breadth and as changing, evolving. It's quite an outstanding experience. So that's what I'd suggest.

KENNEALLY: All right. Well, Dr. Laura Berk, thank you so much for joining me on the program today.

BERK: My pleasure. Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Jeremy Brieske with Burst Marketing is our producer. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC's Velocity of Content podcast.

END OF FILE