

The following interview appears in The Complete K-12 Newsletter, November 2011. Additional information and subscription terms are available at [www.educationmarketresearch.com](http://www.educationmarketresearch.com).

## **K-12 INTERVIEW**

*This month K-12 Newsletter talks with Bert Bower, founder and CEO of Teachers' Curriculum Institute (TCI), a K-12 publisher of online and print social studies programs.*

**K-12:** *You started out as a classroom aide and social studies teacher. Did you plan to become a teacher or did it happen by accident?*

**Bower:** I was working in Latin America and am bilingual and then worked for the federal Migrant Education program in California as a teacher aide. That experience inspired me to get my teaching credential and become a bilingual teacher. For eight years I taught U.S. and world history, world cultures, government and Latin American studies. I also did work in international and class cultural education to create international curriculum. From there, I worked on a series of textbooks for D.C. Heath and learned publishing from the inside. Then I went back to the Stanford School of Education, got my doctorate in social studies education and worked in cooperative learning, after which I began to develop a more interactive way to teach social studies.

**K-12:** *When did that turn into a desire to start your own company?*

**Bower:** I was teaching a social studies methods course at Stanford. During 1987-1989, I took my student teachers to brainstorm at the California Council for Social Studies (CCSS). In 1989, the CCSS members said they needed materials and we started TCI as a company.

**K-12:** *How long did it take you to get the business into full swing?*

**Bower:** For the first two years we were working at my house and storing everything in the garage. We started with a very small amount of money and we have never had a larger company fund us. Within months after starting, customers were purchasing our training and our materials, and 22 years later we have never needed a single loan. Our staff is around 50.

**K-12:** *There's been a tremendous interest in reading and then math, and now there's more interest in science. Do you feel social studies has been an overlooked part of the curriculum?*

**Bower:** Unfortunately, it's not as widely funded. We don't have an NSF. Certainly, the Teaching American History grants have been fantastic, and we have several specialty groups and foundations that are actually funded by Congress. So we have some visibility, but not as much as we need.

**K-12:** *You do have the advantage that teachers seem to like to teach social studies. Do you find that to be true?*

**Bower:** Yes. They really love to teach it, and we help them to do language arts with it—reading and writing. All of our elementary programs use expository texts and are more challenging than narrative texts for the kids to read, which is very important.

**K-12:** *Will the Common Core Standards have an effect on the social studies curriculum? Do you expect that the Standards will cause things to be done differently in social studies?*

**Bower:** TCI has joined with several other groups to begin to create common state standards for social studies. This is coming out of the National Governors Association. I have high hopes that we will get a fabulous set of common standards for social studies.

**K-12:** *Everybody in the publishing world is coming forward and promoting their products as matching up with the Standards. How do educators judge whether those claims are true? How do they know which products are the real gold standard?*

**Bower:** If EdGate, the correlation services provider, is doing its job, then that should work for teachers. Most publishers use EdGate to do their correlations. They do it for all the states and their correlations are very strong. But in science, for example, TCI is coming out with some new science programs, and they are completely built on the new framework. Educators need to ask the curriculum provider about when the program was created and written. If they ask a couple of simple questions like that they can be sure they are getting the latest and best.

**K-12:** *You have been a proponent of group interactive types of lessons as opposed to lecturing. Why do you think the interactive way is better for the students?*

**Bower:** In spending so much time in classrooms as an aide, teacher and supervisor, I can tell you what I saw over and over again. The sage on the stage just talking, with kids listening and writing it down and regurgitating is a narrow focus on linguistic skills. Students are using only a small part of their multiple intelligences, and it creates a culture in schools I call “silent violence.” We’re killing the next generation; we’re not exciting them. It’s obvious that we need an interactive classroom.

**K-12:** *Could that stem from the teacher’s fear of having kids up and around and moving in groups?*

**Bower:** That fear is part of it. This is the way teachers were taught. There are a lot of root causes, but the minute a teacher gets over that hurdle and begins to do something interactive, they’ll see higher student engagement, better discussions with lots of opinions, and students actually enjoying learning social studies. This is not to say that kids don’t read or write. They do all of that with TCI, but we try to make it interesting for them. All teachers probably had some experience of traveling or doing historical research or something that got them so interested in history or social studies. Why can’t students do that too?

**K-12:** *Do teachers still need strong advocates to help them over the barrier and become receptive to interactive approaches or can they become more open to the new approaches on their own?*

**Bower:** With TCI, it’s only a matter of degrees. The social studies market is about \$335 million a year. We play in that market anywhere from 8% to 10%. We’re not huge, but a somewhat significant player and are a part of the regular adoption machine. There’s one important characteristic in the districts that adopt TCI. The districts need to have somebody in a leadership position who cares about learning. These people seek out and obtain the more innovative programs. TCI can make fantastic teachers incredible and we can make mediocre teachers good, but we can’t help negative teachers.

**K-12:** *Have the big players—Pearson, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, McGraw-Hill—gotten the message at all? Are they doing things to compete with you and liven up their offerings? They still have the printed textbook, but are they trying to do more of what you do?*

**Bower:** They are our competition and take more of the marketshare. So we know what they're up to and they have all wanted to partner with us. We even had a partnership with Prentice Hall for a while. But the big textbook companies are slow-moving dinosaurs. They see something innovative and they take it and put it in a sidebar. That's no way to create a curriculum. From everything I've seen so far, they are not innovating in a digital way.

**K-12:** *Have you seen a strong penetration for the interactive whiteboards and has that had a positive impact on your business?*

**Bower:** A few years ago only a select few teachers had interactive whiteboards. Today the majority of teachers do, and the numbers are growing annually. We've been asked to partner with the digital whiteboard people, but they have a couple of big problems. There's a wonderful possibility to use them, but the software is difficult to master and it takes a tremendous amount of time to put in all the content. They're bulky and expensive. In the last year and a half, we have completely changed our instructional delivery system at TCI. We now have a proprietary interactive software application that is beamed to teachers via the Internet. They can open up one of our presentations and they can show video, do drag-and-drop, write on it, blow images up, etc. They can do these things on the interactive whiteboard and it comes completely loaded with the entire curriculum. They can also change the presentations by deleting or adding slides or otherwise customizing our presentations in any way you can imagine. Teachers can use all the features in our subscriptions whether they have a digital whiteboard or are in a one-computer classroom. We've built in the whiteboard functionality.

**K-12:** *Are you seeing or anticipating demand for mobile applications?*

**Bower:** We're not seeing it yet, but we are anticipating it. In our Student Subscription, for example, students read the text and then take a Reading Challenge. Their scores are automatically downloaded to their teacher's subscription. We anticipate that students will want to access this content on a mobile device. This is just the beginning. Soon, our system will be hardware-agnostic and will operate on mobile devices, iPad, PC, Mac, laptop, whatever.

**K-12:** *Do you see the "anywhere, anytime" learning trend leading to the breakdown of the traditional classroom model?*

**Bower:** I don't think the classroom model is going to go away entirely. But there's not enough time, so this new trend to blended education is where TCI is now. We're creating a system where everything that happens in the classroom can be followed up with readings and activities at home. The process can start either at home or in school. All of our assets, whether linguistic, visual or video, are going to be on platforms both for the classroom and home. The teacher's job is to inspire students to care about finishing that activity at home or online.

**K-12:** *What's the trend on sales of digital vs. print versions of your products?*

**Bower:** Last year we were at 6% digital. This year we're at the tipping point. We're now over 50%, and we're creating products that are digital-only. All of a sudden, the physical textbook is going to be dead. It's not even about the text, but it's about all the other incredible things you could do with technology that you could never do before. For us it's not about sitting kids down passively in front of a monitor. It's about how to use technology to create a truly interactive classroom, not just with technology but with each other and with the teacher and primary sources.

**K-12:** *What about new products? You already mentioned science.*

**Bower:** In social studies we're creating a high school world history product right now called *HistoryAlive! World Connections*. That will come out next year. Science will be out in 2013 and will start with elementary. It will probably be called *Bring Science Alive!*

**K-12:** *Do you see TCI remaining totally independent, or do you see one of the big companies buying it because of its success?*

**Bower:** All you need to do is see what happens when the big guys buy innovative companies to guess my answer. Think of all the companies that have been bought up and their products no longer exist. That is not the plan for TCI.

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