The Anti-Textbook Proposal: Reconceiving History Education without Textbooks

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Abstract

Textbooks are synonymous with the institution of schooling. Perception for the necessity of textbooks can comprise a slippery slope for educators. While many educators see them as valuable assets in their classrooms, others view them as hindrances to the intentional kinds of learning and engagement that account for engaged learning, critical thinking, and community building necessary for students to become informed thinkers. This paper will suggest that textbooks not be regarded as the sacred cows they have been in the past. The production of texts from various nations are substantial influences on the received knowledge by which people operate and interact with one another and, more importantly, the ways by which they view the others around the world. Alongside social experiences, they function cumulatively to build the general lens through which students view and interpret the world. Textbooks are not needed for this to be a genuine experience.

Keywords: textbook, history, social studies, public, K-12, nationalism, textbook bias

1.1 Introduction

Sometimes the simplest of questions sound the silliest, but ring earnestly with potential. Here is one such question: Why use a textbook for history instruction at all? Before considering this merely a glib idea to posit, take a moment and think about what it means from a cultural perspective. The model and experience that almost everyone who has attended school has is that there was some sort of history textbook that had to be read at one point. These history textbooks, in spite of best intents and mountains of graphics, are rarely page turners. But we have gotten so used to the ease of their use and presence, that we seldom question them. If anything, we question their absence, if there is one.

I define a textbook as being a compendium of historical and/or social facts and concepts organized according to different periods of history and presented in a manner that is cogent to the student. They are written so as to be in accordance with a given framework of educational standards, be they national or state-based, and outcomes with a particular focus to the flow of the text. The content of these texts are customized to emphasize certain concepts while de-emphasizing or omitting other important concepts of human experience. I once taught from a world history book that devoted a single paragraph to the holocaust of World War II, and it was the best-selling textbook across the United States at that time. For teachers and the schools they work in, textbooks represent the preferred approach of administration and the path of least resistance in planning instruction and assessment. They come packaged as a set of commodities that often include multimedia components, assessment tools, materials for content re-teaching, and the like. That can be the positive side of a textbook. On the negative side, they are laced with and built on half-truths, often present overly simplistic and myopic views of human experience, and do not challenge their readers to engage the world in any real tradition of critical thinking. This addresses my initial question: Why use a textbook at all? My reasoning for asking this is addresses two foundational assumptions, outside the economic components of the text. First, we no longer live in a world that is so simplistic that half-truths will get us where we need to be, either as a nation or as the human species. Students emerging from school go into the world armed with those same inaccurate half-truths and operate according to an unquestioning reliance on their accuracy. The effects on the world stage and between groups of people have the potential to be divisive and devastating.

Second, students are smarter that we are giving them credit for and the continued use of these kinds of instructional resources does not demonstrate the necessary level of trust and belief in future generations that will one day assume leadership of the world's societies.

1.2 The Power of Depiction

The legitimacy inherent in any historical account orbits around the power of depiction (Barbre, 2008). The history curriculum does not determine students' entire worldview, but it does present a serious set of influences on bodies of knowledge and the values that accompany them. Michael Apple (1991) writes:

Texts are really messages to and about the future. As part of a curriculum, they participate in no less than the organized knowledge system of society. They participate in creating what a society has recognized as legitimate and truthful. They help set the canons of truthfulness and, as such, also help re-create major reference points for what knowledge, culture, belief, and morality really are."(p. 4)

Textbooks utilized through the history curriculum alongside other sources of information lay the foundation through which students view information and experiences that follow. Crotty (1998) and Patton (2002) refer to this as social constructionism. Social constructionism is the ongoing and collective effort to generate a framework of knowledge and value that legitimizes a particular perspective.

History is told from a nationalist point of view and mostly compliments certain experiences from more powerful particular groups of people from other, less powerful groups. There is a plethora of scholarship as it relates to bias in history texts (see Azaki, 2008; Beal, Nozaki, & Yang, 2001; Dhand, 1988; Conley and Osborne, 1983; Crawford and Foster, 2006; Garcia and Tanner, 1985). Because a canonized textual approach to history presents no alternative set of experiences to challenge dominant assertion(s), the information contained in history books is presented as the sole set of truths (Barbre, 2008). James Axtell (1979) writes, "What we have gained in national depth, we have lost in historical breadth" (p. 550). The centering of history on the national level does not lend itself to the larger discourse of cause-effect relationships that exist between different nations.

An historical system of value can have value and relevance without the need of victimizing another group of set of beliefs. However, this polarization is the most convenient and oft repeated way to present information (Fleming, 1992; Greenfield, 1986). Exceptionalism within historical writing has the result of casting the 'other' country or group in a negative or minimal light. While exceptionalism doesn't always represent a negative depiction, it always brings with it different degrees of bias and accuracy. If there is a consistent feature to history texts, it is that they are written so as to make people and events fit together seamlessly, and they work to promote exceptionalism on the part of the nation-state of which they are meant to educate. It cannot be said that there is a singular culture in any nation-state. However, certain groups possess greater degrees of power and influence than others and this account for a particular orientation and structure to information that is consumed by schools and their students (Neys and Molenaars, 1999). One of the results of group influence is the ability to control the official version of history as taught and so accepted and therefore built on.

1.3 Influences on the Texts We Use

When analyzing textbooks from any curriculum, one must first acknowledge the multiple factors influence the presentation of print and the pictures on their pages. A second important dimension is that textbooks represent an economic commodity and it is in the publisher's own best interest to secure as large a return on the investment on the human and capital resources that went into the development of this product (the textbook). Michael Apple (1991) discusses the construction of textual culture in two ways: first as lived experience and the second as a commodity.

"This dual nature of culture poses a dilemma for those individuals who are interested in understanding the dynamics of popular and elite culture in our society. It makes studying the dominant cultural products-from films, to books, to television, to music- decidedly slippery, for there are sets of relations behind each of these "things." And these in turn are situated within the larger web of the social and market relations of capitalism" (Apple, p. 22). In the end, the publishers adhere to the preferences of the groups they seek as clients. It is less important to identify just who and what these groups are, rather than to understand that they are different by their inherent values and experiences. C. Behan McCullagh (2000) observes that "…liberals think people are normally motivated by reason and principle; Marxists think they are normally motivated, often unconsciously, by socioeconomic self-interest.

The inferences they draw about people's motives for action will vary accordingly" (p. 40). For this and other reasons, groups are bound to disagree. McCullagh also states that, "Liberals will think a person's avowed goals and principles are important ingredients in their character; but a Marxist will prefer to look at the dispositions which seem to inform a person's actual behavior, expecting to find self-interest trumping principle" (p. 40).The influence of the author's values on the way history is presented becomes relevant because cultural value systems differ from one to another. Regardless of political, linguistic, ethnic, or cultural similarities, the fact that authors live across national borders from one another accounts for significant factors of difference.

Schools and the social structures they feed are largely influenced by symbolic power. Apple (1991) quotes Stuart Hall in stating that also placed within a particular framework is the set of ideas for thought or action in what is considered "...rational, reasonable, credible, indeed sayable or thinkable within the given vocabularies of motive and action available to us" (p. 12). Hegemonic dominance over a potentially rival, but weaker, structure of truths lies in creating, maintaining and reproducing these very limits. Further quoting, this becomes what Stuart refers to as "…the horizon of the taken-for-granted. What the world is and how it works, for all practical purposes…Their dominance lies precisely in the power they have to contain within their limits, to frame within the circumference of their thought, the reasoning and calculation [and so perception] of other social groups" (p. 12). Unless a student has experiences that directly refute the assertions of the text(s), the facts as they are presented through the text comprise the substance of the 'truth' they are exposed to.

1.4 Student Experiences

With few exceptions, most students, especially those at the secondary level, do not have a range of experience outside this school-based cultural framework that would or could possibly refute or challenge the claims in the history books they read. Terrie Epstein (1997) demonstrated that students from diverse backgrounds often construct different interpretations of the same materials that are read from history books. Therefore, students at this age or grade range suffer a handicap in their ability to look critically at the information and experience presented in history texts and engages this set of understandings within a larger discourse.

Numerous aspects of the schooling experience address citizenship education, of which history is the primary vehicle of delivery. Historical events with their outcomes, both critical and minor, are interwoven and form a basic perception or set of assumptions in the mind of the student. The tests that students must take each year directly address this information. Carole Hahn's (1998) research into important and defining features of citizenship education across numerous westernized countries shows that standardized examinations often leave the teacher feeling pressured to be able to cover the information relevant to the curriculum and the test. This leaves little, if any, additional time for critical inquiry into history. Which is the point of learning anything? This fact, accompanied by the use of standardized history texts, blunts the edge of inquiry in favor of a model of education that focuses more on performance. Whether a person is a member of a marginalized group or the dominant socioeconomic group, certain prior events must be credible to some degree in order for a cohesive set of social beliefs and assumptions to exist. Common assumptions constitute part of what holds any group together. They account for a portion of the attitudes held towards each other and other(s) outside the group.

Depiction is rarely a simple list of insults or innuendo that are directed at all members of one group from another, though there are certainly examples that do exist. This skewed depiction often serves to legitimize existing policies or attitudes towards marginalized groups. This is done by downplaying or more narrowly interpreting the strenuous features of history as it may have occurred between both, or all, groups of people. Raymond Grew (1980) addressed bias when he wrote of the fundamental need for legitimacy and objectivity in comparing historical accounts between peoples. Quoting Lord Acton, "The process of civilization depends on transcending nationality" (Grew, 1980, p. 763).

1.5 Implications for Social Studies Education

The research consistently shows that historical narratives centered on the nation-state model do not present the fullest account of past events. The resulting bias in this depiction presents groups or individuals from different culture(s) in a manner that is ultimately not truthful. These selective truths result from varied interpretations of similar events and are partially accountable for the bias or prejudice that exists between citizens of different national communities. As Meyer (1988) contends, citizenship is an abstract term that is primarily functional in nature.

Therefore, each country or group constructs the model citizen in a different fashion. Lee Heller (1998) also addresses this issue: "If the poststructuralist enterprise has taught us anything, it is that truth is constructed, a product and servant of the culture it claims to describe" (p. 336). These different perceptions of truth also influence the larger makeup of group social perception from one geo-social setting to another. The biased depiction in textbooks does not occur in all areas of life, but has its most prominent effects in those areas where nationalism or civic sentiments are concerned. This occurs in those spaces where history is oriented towards the building of a particular social mindset, and that favors the continual reproduction of that mindset. Lee Heller (1998), citing Edward Said (1978), writes, "Fields of learning, as much as the works of even the most eccentric artists, are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries, and governments" (p. 340).

In the context of schooling, information relevant to the building of culture is taught in a repetitious fashion at every level so that people emerge from school with similar national and civic sentiments. The important feature here is that, while students and others receive a constant stream of cultural messaging during their daily lives (media, music, social roles, language, and the like), the production and reproduction of culture also occurs through the process of schooling as it relates to deeper cultural messages and meanings. Elliot Eisner (1998) observes that that numerous traditions have been employed by people to describe and interpret their constructed world(s). These include history, art, literature, dance, drama, poetry, and music as the most common forms and the different styles in which they occur. The resulting preferences are then oriented around the acceptance of certain genres of thought or belief and the rejection of others.

2.0 Cultural Theory

According to Neys and Molenaars (1999), cultural theory addresses the unique manner by which a group of people defines themselves and constructs their social reality. Neys and Molenaars also assert that within groups of the same culture, there are self-adjusting mechanisms which cause the values for culture to change over time. This can explain why certain social values change over time. Within this ongoing inter-group tension, the framework of sociology and aesthetic convergence, or social aesthetics, becomes important. The construction of this social aesthetic heavily influences the hierarchy of priorities and actions that are seen as best for the group in question. Naturally, there are substantial differences between the liberal, moderate, and conservative elements or individuals within the groups of any nation and within the differences of these liberal, moderate, and conservative points of view, the concept of a non-uniform synthesis of aesthetics is further reinforced.

People may speak the same language and share much of the same lifestyle and cultural belief, but what they believe is important and that which constitutes the best decision or course of action will change substantially from one setting to another. While younger students who learn the orientation of this historical or social aesthetic may not always adhere to the information passed along from their peers or elders in the strictest sense of the word, they still have it, in the least, as an introductory orientation to their view of the world and their place in it, either as part of a culture or as an individual.

These values of this aesthetic revolve around what they see as 'best' for them, in both the material and non-material sense of the word. This dominant value system, or hegemony, is located across various fragmented groups, or individuals, within and across cultures and on varying scales of population. Nussbaum (2003) refers to these types of social choice options as "preferences about preferences" (p. 121). This concept applies to the manner in which a person's social reality is constructed, but they also continually exercise choice on the parts of that same social fabric with which they agree/disagree. Due to the fragmentation of these groups, the boundaries and civic rules of nation-states may apply in terms of 'preferences about preferences', but not in an ultimate or decisive sense. The presentation of particular materials or information will favor the establishment and propagation of a particular hegemonic or civic orientation. Therefore, the schools, as sites for the reproduction of social culture (i.e. beliefs, values, norms, and rituals), will systematically teach and evaluate students based on the particular forms of information they teach. While this information does change slightly with each text used, the continued use of institutional textbooks and their lack of breadth and depth serve to advantage some and marginalize, omit, and possibly misrepresent others to varying degrees. With this, the breadth of the historical account is narrowed or summarized in its truthful dimensions.

2.1 The Anti-Textbook Proposal

The research clearly shows several cross-national tendencies as they relate to history and civics education. Regardless of any era in question, there are at least two certainties when it comes to history education. First, that the texts of a given country will favor the perspectives of those holding power or influence. Second, that other nations who may be part of a national historical narrative will not be addressed in a way that is both objective and truthful. It would be preferable if there were a short list of culprits as it relates to conveying this misinformation, but that is not the case. Every nation does this with their printed narrative and for reasons that are ultimately bound to self-preservation. Nations seek to preserve their own unique cultural and/or historical narrative. In order for this narrative to be sustained, a cohesive framework of truths and assertions is required, not all of which are truthful, or even attempting to be objective. These truths and assertions require an effective 'other' at particular points of the narrative, either to minimize or vilify. The texts utilized by schools are the products of multiple layers of authoring and revision and serve to indoctrinate, rather than inform (Apple, 1991; Crofts, 1986; Griffith, 1990). Armed with these cohesive sets of 'truths', canonized textbooks present a narrowed version of various historical events and through this narrowness critical thinking is stunted, if not absent altogether. Canonized historical texts are the result of a production and distribution system that seeks to please those who control it and so maximize the return on investment. Most, if not all, educational institutions at the secondary level are guided by some form or framework of educational standards. They are built around the unquestioning acceptance of educational standards, rather than the expertise of authors. An example would be that of revisionist history versus the canonized textual version.

There are several reasons to reject a canonized text in favor of multiple texts from a variety of sources and authors. First, implementation of a singular canonized historical narrative is short-sighted in that it istoo simplistic and presents biased versions of history to the student. The true nature and history in depicting how different groups of people have interacted has never been so neat and tidy as canonized history texts would have one believe. There are good, bad, ugly, beautiful, hypocritical, and truthful dimensions of everyone's history and students in schools should not be shielded from this.

The second component of this argument is that educators and policymakers should, at the outset, proceed with a greater belief in the abilities of students who will one day be in charge of running the very world they live in. Students should not be educated in ways that only promote rote forms of thinking. This habit is one that is easily taken from school and into the workplace. It is in every nation's best interests to educate students that are better trained and able to think and analyze facts critically. For an educated workforce, this only makes sense for the future social and economic wellbeing of the particular nation.

Just as people are often biased in the stories they tell, so too are nations and their national narratives and this is continuously reinforced through the use of canonized textbooks (Ignatieff, 1999; Marrero, 2003). The ability to think and analyze information in critical terms do not comprise the outer boundary. Were students to have a standard form of access to a variety of sources from which to study, teachers could engage the professional judgement that comes with effective teaching, instead of acting as agents in the banking concept of education (Freire, 1970). They would have the opportunity to engage the students within a framework of critical discourse.

Nation-states are now more interconnected than they have ever been. People regularly travel abroad to work in any range of capacities and must adapt to their new surroundings to some degree. This is not just in economic terms, but also in terms of the production and dissemination of culture and information. With this sense of global interconnectedness, students should be able to explore their own culture or nation's history from the perspective of both a thesis and an antithesis. This may seem to be a complicated and sticky enterprise to embark on, but in the end, it is a necessary one.

2.2 Conclusion

If one were to imagine doing away with the use of canonized history texts, it would unlock a plethora of opportunities. Students could become critical consumers of information that arises from the lived experiences of authors and others whose lives provide smaller ingredients for the overall recipe. They would, through the increased presentation of archival research and oral histories, be able to listen to the voices of those who came before and better understand the world they lived in and how things came to change or not change. They would be able to better study the experiences of marginalized groups within their own borders to a degree of detail not presently possible through a canonized approach.

Study of content such as this would bring the experiences of others to life in a way that would promote greater aspirations of social justice. James Moore (2006) writes of the importance competing narratives in stating that "students will learn that controversy and competing narratives are important aspects of social studies and are indispensable in the search for truth and understanding" (p. 140). In becoming critical consumers of information such as this, students would "understand that human knowledge is a 'work-in-progress' and undergoes revisions in light of new evidence, technological advances, and current cultural and political trends" (p. 140).

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