Textbooks and Primary Source Analysis

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In such a diverse society, some have suggested that teachers use primary source documents to increase history knowledge and build historical thinking skills. These calls come from a myriad of works that have been critical of textbooks. While these concerns may be appropriate, textbooks are still frequently used in the classroom. In an attempt to better use textbooks in light of such criticism, I propose that teachers and students analyze their textbooks as if they were primary sources. Discussion about how this analysis might be accomplished as well as a sample classroom handout is provided.

Introduction

School is often thought of as a place where children go to learn information and skills that will help them function in society. The learning students receive in school is not without a bias, however. In addition to content knowledge, students also learn implicit lessons about “what education is for, what and whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and who has the right to answer these questions” (Apple, 2000). Often these implicit lessons that Michael Apple refers to as “official knowledge” are by-products of a conservative, neoliberal ideology that excludes those in minority and alternative groups.

In an effort to deal with the demands of a diverse society, teachers need to be able to think critically about their discipline and about the needs of their students. It is only then that teachers can help their students think critically about the education that they are receiving and become informed consumers of that information. While the critical thinking that teachers must engage in is not necessarily political in nature, as Apple (2000) advocates, similar critical analysis is necessary for teachers to fully understand the bias of their instructional materials. Thus, this article proposes that teachers help their students to critically examine their education by analyzing textbooks as if they were primary sources.

Official Knowledge and Textbooks

“Official knowledge” is conveyed to students in many ways. Through curriculum guides, worksheets, textbooks and supplemental materials, students gain an incremental understanding of what knowledge is legitimate in the place called “school.” Yet, it is through the textbook that this knowledge is most readily made available to students (Apple, 1986). Textbooks illustrate “the language” of the academic discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), what structure of information is most highly valued in that discipline (Coffin, 2006), and which cultural norms are the most legitimate (Apple, 1996).

The classroom teacher often reinforces the implicit knowledge learned from the textbook. In 1986, Apple noted that teachers have far less discretion to alter the curriculum or vary the texts used, all in keeping with the guise of “high standards” (p.82). This phenomenon is even more prominent today under the strictures of No Child Left Behind (Noddings, 2007). Thus, the textbook has become even more important in the conveyance of official knowledge and its impact on students.

The notion of “high standards for all” certainly is a contributing factor to the lack of discretion that teachers have in their own classrooms. In creating these standards, state and federal governments have attempted to build
the framework for a national curriculum that envelops the important disciplinary concepts that all children need to know. Apple (1996) rightly argues that such a step towards a national curriculum has an “underlying logic of false consensus” (p. 35). In a democracy of different racial, ethnic, political, and social groups, a national curriculum necessarily excludes diversity in the official knowledge, if for no other reason than because there is not enough time to teach all of the multiple perspectives. Textbooks, written in alignment with these standards, often contribute to this consensus view of the world with only an occasional nod to alternative perspectives. Just like the national curriculum, textbooks cannot elaborate on every perspective. To mediate this concern, then, the conception of what a textbook is and how it should be used is of paramount importance in teaching children to create their own meaning of the text.

In order for meaning to be created, textbooks must be tied to the discursive process of education. This process is made whole through discourse (Apple, 1986) and, thus, instructional methods must be used to create an engagement between students and the textbook. Thinking beyond the most basic recall of facts requires the textbook to be more than just a delivery system of ideas (Apple, 2000). Even researchers outside of the field of critical pedagogy have expressed the need for students to be able to think critically and independently in order to compete in the current world market, albeit for different purposes (Friedman, 2005; Lesgold, 2007). In depth analysis of the textbook, then, is not just a political and social necessity for those groups excluded from the official curriculum, but for all students in need of critical thinking skills.

What critical thinking skills afford students are a means with which to construct meaning about reality. While the content of the textbook may be biased, the content itself has implications in the real world. Textbooks are selective in what information is presented and how it is organized; yet they also are tied to the larger ideas with which students will be confronted outside the schoolhouse walls. Students must be able to situate themselves in relation to these ideas and be able to make critical judgments as to whether or not they accept them.

Relying solely on the textbook for assistance in making these critical judgments does not work. A study by David Lavere (2008) found that the majority of questions posed by history textbooks were recall-oriented and not age-appropriate. The textbook cannot be relied upon to draw the student into discourse with itself through the use of higher-order questioning and interaction. Rather, a means of discourse must come from communication and discussion with others, making classroom literacy a crucial component to the creation of meaning (Luke, 1988). The teacher can facilitate an atmosphere of discourse and critical thinking through the use of student knowledge and the text. More specifically, an examination of the textbook as if it were a primary source may be helpful in facilitating these discussions.

The main content of the textbook alone may not give students very rich fodder from which to create meaning. Textbook writers often attempt to detach the content of the textbook from the real world and examine the content objectively (see Loewen’s (2007) Introduction). Historical arguments rarely are made explicit in textbook passages, if referenced at all. This limiting of the meta-discourse (Porat, 2004) limits the possible reactions that readers can have against the text. Though total objectivity is impossible to accomplish for the reasons enumerated above, the language used and not used in the textbook is sanitized to create an appearance of objectivity and consensus (Apple, 1996). Other information must be made available to students in order for information to be integrated and to enable critical discussions.

Some recommend (Lavere, 2008) that educators expose students to primary sources that might elaborate and/or contradict the information from the textbook. Such a method is useful because it gives students more information.
from which they can make a critical analysis. These sources also have a more obvious author and, usually, a more obvious perspective for students to identify. In understanding the perspective of the primary source, students can then position the new information with or against the information found in the text and be able to discuss the specific implications of the content in relation to their own opinions of the topic. While this method does indeed help students to grapple with the content, it still holds the textbook as an amorphous entity that is the continuous authority in the classroom.

Textbooks are not written in a vacuum. Like any other source, they are created within the socio-political context of the time of writing and are subject to the demands of the market. Understanding the market of the textbooks, the history of the people who have contributed to the information presented, and the time-period in which they are written, are key to understanding the types of content and linguistic decisions that were made during its creation. Indeed, they are created from the amalgamation of many primary sources; however, they cannot present facts in an unbiased way because they are written within a social context.

Textbooks and Primary Source Analysis

Examining textbooks as if they were primary sources helps dispel the notion that textbooks are the ultimate authority. Even the best of textbooks are biased in some way. Students can accept this bias as reality if they so choose, or refute it with other notions of the facts. Regardless, without a proper understanding of the source of the textbook, students cannot fully engage in discourse with it. As critical thinking is brought about through discourse, this seems to be a very important issue. Such an understanding also facilitates deeper discussion with regards to other sources and helps to draw students into the discourse of the academic discipline at large.

Some may argue that these skills are too “reading-based” for other academic subjects to engage in. They are not. Rather than focusing on general vocabulary and grammar related issues, content and authorial biases are the focus of such a method. While vocabulary and grammar issues can be an integral component of such an approach (see Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004), the purpose of focusing on textbooks as if they were primary sources is full disclosure as to the perspective of the author(s) and how that perspective shapes the content and form of that message (Apple, 2000).

Like primary source documents, textbooks can be examined through methods of sourcing, close reading, contextualization and corroboration with other sources (Center for History and New Media, 2007). The whole of the text, the context in which it was written, and the perspectives of the author, are all key components in this analysis. It is the amalgamation of these components that provides a clear picture as to the meaning(s) that can be made from it. Here, genuine interpretation can take place that extends beyond feelings felt about the text to an understanding of the premises put forth by the author(s). Through this lens, students can begin to make critical judgments about the information presented and learn to question the implications of the information in ways that will help them to function in the world envisioned by authors such as Alan Lesgold and Thomas Friedman.

Such an approach can best be utilized in the social studies classroom. Beginning with the discipline’s creation in the 1916 Report of the Committee on the Social Studies, social studies includes “those [courses] whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups” (Martorella, 1996, p. 9). Social studies classes, then, deal directly with these issues of education authority, power and legitimacy that Apple (2000) discusses in his work on official knowledge.
Much debate has occurred over what information should be taught to achieve those aims (Byford & Russell, 2007; Garcia, 2008; Jenness, 1990; Kincheloe, 2001). Aside from the actual information that should be taught, debate also has centered on what critical thinking in the social studies looks like (Apple, 2000; Dutt-Doner, Cook-Cottone, & Allen, 2007; Lavere, 2008; McGuire, 2007; Wineburg, 2001). Both of these debates are illustrated in the content and instructional activities found in social studies textbooks. Much of the political wrangling described in Apple’s (1986) Teachers and Texts, has a direct application to the political, economic, and social spheres discussed in social studies classes across the country.

Under the Teaching American History (TAH) Grants created out of the American History and Civics Education Act of 2004, school systems are provided with the means to train teachers in primary source work in conjunction with local university professors. In theory, teachers are to take this learning back to their schools and implement these new primary source teaching strategies in their classrooms. Thus, primary source analysis is being promoted in social studies classrooms already, so the tools for an examination of textbooks as if they were primary sources are already available. (See Appendix below for an example of how to analyze textbooks as if they were primary sources.)

Sourcing the textbook can be an extension of the “getting to know the textbook” activities that so many social studies teachers have their students complete at the beginning of the year. Along with finding the pages on which the index, table of contents, and glossary, sourcing gives the students a chance to research the authors, where they work, and what their philosophies of education and social studies are. A class discussion of such information will help put the information the students are about to read in perspective and demystify the authority of the textbook.

It should be noted that a complete sourcing of the textbook might not be entirely possible because of the larger process that textbooks go through during the writing process. Editors, consultations, and the textbook industry itself all have a hand in the content, structure, and meta-narrative present in the final product. These factors need to be made explicit to students and teacher guidance is very necessary during this part of the activity. The broader notion of sourcing the textbook, however limited, is integral to better understanding the other aspects of the analysis.

Close reading and contextualization often, but not always, go hand-in-hand. Close reading helps students read the intended meaning of the author, including the implied meaning, through the author’s choice of words and syntactic structure. Close reading can be as simple as examining which events the author(s) feel are most important by the length of discussion around the event to more elaborate examinations like the ones explained in Schleppegrell, Achugar and Oteiza’s (2004) work in which actors and subjects are examined to better understand the animacy of historical characters.

Contextualization often accompanies close reading as it is difficult to do the latter without a good knowledge of the former. Contextualization for textbooks, however, must be about the time period being discussed in the content as well as the time period in which the textbook is written. Without knowledge of both, the interpretation of the author’s meaning will be skewed and the unquestioned authority of the textbook as fact will remain. Contextualization may help explain why certain antiquated terms are used and how they should be interpreted in today’s society. Such a discussion not only helps students to translate the information but also mediates any possible misuse of terms in or out of the classroom context.

Only after these analyses have been made should other primary and secondary sources be sought for further comparison and analysis. Following a similar guide for interpreting the new sources, students may be better able to
fully evaluate the information that they are being presented and be able to respond to higher-order thinking questions with a deeper knowledge of the content and a critical eye to the sources, both primary and secondary.

Conclusion

The issue of official knowledge is one that should concern everyone in a community. What is taught in schools has a direct effect on the way that the government and economy function. Critical thinking in the classroom has been a concern for educators since the time of Harold Rugg (Boyle-Baise & Goodman, 2009). Regardless of the political or economic climate, students need critical thinking skills to compete and to continue a democratic form of government. Apple (1986) rightly suggests that textbooks and textbook instruction need special examination due to their prominence in the classroom. Examining textbooks as if they were primary sources is a way to enable students to think critically about their education while still learning the material needed to be successful in school. Such a method is not time intensive, but may go a long way to help students better understand the information being presented to them.

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References

Print-based


*Web-based*


About the Author

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Appendix

Analyzing the Textbook as a Primary Source

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<tr>
<th>Categories of Analysis</th>
<th>Questions to Ask</th>
<th>Notes and Thoughts</th>
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| 1. Sourcing            | • Who is/are the author(s) and where is/are the author(s) from?  
                         • When was the text written?  
                         • What events or schools of thought were taking place when this was written that might have affected the author(s)? | |
| 2. Close Reading       | • What does/do the author(s) talk most about in this section?  
                         • What does/do the authors(s) touch upon but not elaborate on?  
                         Why do you think they didn’t elaborate?  
                         • Is there anything that the author(s) doesn’t/don’t discuss?  
                         Why do you think that information was left out? | |
| 3. Contextualization   | • Are there any terms that are used that might be from a specific time period and that are different from what we say today?  
                         Do any of these terms have a different meaning today?  
                         • Are the views you identified in your Close Reading different from what you think happened? | |
| 4. Corroboration       | Select a topic from this section of the textbook and search the websites approved by the media center to find another source on this topic.  
                         • Does the new information you found support or counter the information you read in the textbook?  
                         • Is there any new information that you can add to the textbook information that might help clarify what happened in history? | |

Modified from the “Primary Source Activity Rubric for Observations”  