Effectively Using Social Studies Textbooks in Historical Inquiry

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Of all of the educational tools used in social studies education, by far the most critiqued is the standard basal textbook. If used properly, nevertheless, textbooks are not as problematic as critics claim and can be a useful tool in the teaching and learning of social studies and history. Based on the focus found in the Common Core Standards on informational texts, the practicality of using textbooks is especially true in today’s educational environment. This article was written with the goal of helping social studies teachers develop lessons that assist their students in meeting the requirements of the Common Core. One specific strategy is described to offer teachers an example of how to effectively use their textbook in a Common Core focused and social studies content-based activity. A sample lesson, based on an inquiry activity titled “Hollywood or History,” is provided.

Key Words: Textbooks, Historical Inquiry, Common Core Standards, Social Studies, Movies, Film, Gone with the Wind

Introduction

Of all of the educational tools used in social studies education, by far the most critiqued is the standard basal textbook. Social studies textbooks, especially in history, have been described as overused by teachers, containing biases and inaccuracies, and as being boring (e.g., Alridge, 2006; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; FitzGerald, 1979; Loewen, 1995). A few critics suggest textbooks have been used as a tool of governmental brain washing or as the catalysts for terroristic acts (Fox News Network, 2009; Gilbert, 2003; Root, 1955).

I agree many teachers are over-reliant on textbooks. My own research finds textbooks are flawed and often contain both minor and extraordinary biases and inaccuracies (e.g., Roberts, 2009; Roberts & Butler, 2012). In my experience as a classroom teacher and teacher educator, nevertheless, I have discovered that, if used properly, textbooks are not as problematic as critics claim and can be a useful tool in the teaching and learning of social studies and history (Loewen, 2010; Roberts, 2012).

Strengths of Textbooks

What are some strengths that make textbooks suitable for classroom use and lesson plan development? First, textbooks often offer the most concise and straightforward means of providing students with information about the content being studied. When used as one of many sources, they can provide students with background knowledge to build upon when they start examining other documents. Second, textbooks are often assigned to the vast majority of students in a school. When teachers develop a textbook-based lesson plan, most know this one source will likely be accessible. Third, many textbooks are designed to align with state standards (Loewen, 1995; Roberts, 2012). When creating a lesson with the textbook as a source, a teacher can feel comfortable that a highly engaging, but time consuming, lesson will help students develop a deeper understanding of what will be asked on standardized tests (Roberts, 2012). Fourth, one element of textbooks often forgotten is textbooks provide teachers with numerous primary and secondary sources (e.g., images, graphs, letters, maps) that can be used to allow
students to work on skills advocated by social studies educators and researchers (Loewen, 1995, 2010; Roberts, 2012). Finally, though far from perfect, today’s textbooks are better than those from the past, now offering more portrayals of women, minorities, and in some cases offering more of a more balanced account of historic figures and events (Loewen, 2010; Roberts 2012; Wineberg & Monte-Sanno, 2008). Comparing older textbooks to those used today is a productive way for students to understand how historical perspectives can drastically change over time (Loewen, 2010; Roberts, 2012).

Since leaving the classroom in 2011, as a teacher educator I have been exposed to new ideas from the disciplines of social studies and English Language Arts concerning the most effective ways to incorporate literacy into social studies classrooms (e.g., Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Ogle, Kemp, & McBride, 2007; Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2007). The new Common Core standards for English/Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects specify that informational texts, both primary and secondary, should be used in the teaching of writing, reading, and communication. Based on their strengths while taking into account their weaknesses, I offer the conclusion, textbooks are a source that can be used in teaching these new standards (National Governor’s Association for Best Practices, 2012; Roberts, 2012).

The goal, here, is to help social studies teachers develop lessons assisting their students in meeting the requirements of the Common Core standards and the eventual assessments being developed by the Partnership of Assessment Assessments of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. To address the goal, I will describe one specific strategy as an example of how to effectively use the textbook in a Common Core focused and social studies content based activity. There are numerous ways teachers can incorporate textbooks into their lesson planning that engage students to read the text collaboratively (e.g., Cause and effect analysis, Circle of Knowledge, Jigsaw, Preview Maps).

The simple inquiry activity, “Hollywood or History,” is described here because it incorporates the textbook as one of three sources enabling students to work together to answer a sparking question.

**Hollywood or History: Sherman’s Capture of Atlanta**

In my birth state of Georgia, and much of the Southeast, arguably the most hated man in its history was William Tecumseh Sherman. Opinions about General Sherman’s total war policy still divide the nation today. Many in the South believe Sherman acted cruelly and unjustly punished the Confederate states for the war by attacking their civilian population. For instance, Sherman often is blamed for starting the fires that destroyed Atlanta and for creating a path of devastation 300 miles long and 60 mile wide through rural Georgia (Bailey, 2014; London, 2005; McWhirter, 2004; Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2010; Trudeau, 2008).

Many Northerners (and historians from all regions of the country) often view Sherman as a hero and his actions to be just. They perceive his objectives differently, believing Sherman’s sole purpose was to end the war quickly. His victory in Atlanta set the stage for President Abraham Lincoln’s reelection and his swath of destruction was inflicted to help break the South’s will to continue the fight (McWhirter, 2004; Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2010; Trudeau, 2008).

With this difference of public opinion between our regions in mind, I developed a lesson that allows students to use multiple sources (i.e., a textbook, a movie clip from Gone with the...
Wind, and Sherman’s own words) to develop conclusions about Sherman’s capture and treatment of Atlanta. This lesson is based on the United States history content of many states and also incorporates the Common Core standards focusing on reading, writing, and listening. Elementary school teachers who are required to teach their students skills such as standard CCSS.ELA-Litarcy.RI.5.6 which states “analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent” (National Governor’s Association for Best Practices, 2012, p.14) could use this lesson to teach social studies content during Language Arts time. Middle and high school social studies teachers could find ways to collaborate with their English Language Arts colleagues to use part of this lesson in both of their classes. The focus of the collaboration is to help students achieve objectives such as standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH11-12.7 which requires students to “integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media…in order to address a question or solve a problem” (National Governor’s Association for Best Practices, 2012, p. 61).

In order to draw student interest, the lesson uses an action scene from a Hollywood film to help students critically analyze the textbook, a primary source, and a piece of cinematography. The examination of these sources should lead to students using evidence to develop their own evidence-supported opinions about Sherman’s actions. Below a step by step summary of this lesson is provided along with tips for developing similar ones.

**Step 1: Select an Interesting Standard**

Some state standards lend themselves more toward analytical lessons than others. Sherman’s treatment of the civilians in the Atlanta Campaign is one of those standards. The study of the Civil War, and more specifically, the social elements of the war, can be found in elementary, middle, and high school United States history standards throughout the United States (e.g., California Department of Education, 1998; Georgia Department of Education, 2012; New York Department of Education, 1999; Texas Education Agency, 2011). With this common emphasis on the impact that the war had on civilians, I felt it was worthwhile to develop an inquiry-based lesson dealing with this event that could be adapted for three grade levels (5th, 8th, and 11th). The controversy over Sherman’s actions and treatment of civilians during the war led to my conclusion that this would be a topic for an interesting lesson that could be used throughout the nation.

**Step 2: Develop an Interesting Question**

As a fan of the History Channel’s program History vs. Hollywood, I wanted to develop a lesson based on the show’s concept: determining the accuracy of history focused movies. Instead of being told by experts what the facts and the fictions were, I wanted students to be able to use multiple sources to determine evidence on their own. Using the “Hollywood or History” question, students are required to decide if they conclude film, in this case Gone with the Wind, should be considered as an accurate account of history, pure fiction, or somewhere in between by analyzing and discussing multiple sources.

**Step 3: Select your Sources:**

When I develop any inquiry-based lesson, the first source I always use is the textbook. It is important to allow your students to compare textbooks to other sources, as this helps them determine the merit of the text. Due to the overuse of textbooks by their previous teachers, I found students who participate in a textbook centered inquiry love to prove the textbook wrong, though sometimes, after examining all sources, they contend the text is the best source.
For this lesson, the three textbooks selected offer a short, though differing, narrative about Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign. Though the textbooks used in your state or school district may offer different accounts of Sherman’s March the 5th grade text I used, Scott Foresman’s (2008) *Growth of a Nation*, describes Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign in two paragraphs. The concept of “total war” is discussed and students are told that “Sherman’s men ordered everyone to leave Atlanta and burned almost the entire city” (Scott Foresman, 2008, p. 100).

In the 8th grade *Georgia Studies* text, Sherman’s capture of Atlanta is discussed in five paragraphs, with one being devoted to Sherman’s occupation of the city. In this account, Bonnie London (2005) claims that Atlanta’s citizens had “evacuated Atlanta” by September 1, 1864, Sherman’s army stayed in Atlanta until November 15 when they “set fire to the city,” and they left “Atlanta in flames” on November 16 to start the “March to the Sea” (p. 273).

In the 11th grade text, McDougal Littell’s (2007) *The Americans*, Sherman’s capture of Atlanta receives one paragraph. In that paragraph, the authors provide a quote from Sherman’s writing, “He would make Southerners ‘so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it’” and claimed that “in mid-November he burned most of Atlanta and set out toward the coast” (Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, & Woloch, 2007, p. 364).

Though short and arguably containing some inaccuracies about the event, having students read these concise accounts from their textbooks serves as the starting point for the rest of the activity as it helps students gain some prior knowledge about the event. An extension to this part of the activity could be to use several different textbooks or other sources to provide students the opportunity to make further comparisons between the texts and the importance of using multiple sources in understanding a historic event.

The second source is a clip from the movie *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick & Fleming, 1939). The five-minute scene depicting the destruction of Atlanta can be found on YouTube™. The chase scene offers students an exciting view of burning buildings, explosions, and fist fights. The dialog, however, is also interesting. Though ignoring Sherman’s order to evacuate Atlanta two months prior to the burning, Rhett Butler, one of the films protagonists, makes the observation that some of the fires were started by Confederate soldiers who were trying to destroy supplies to keep them out of Union hands (Civil War Home, 2005). It should be noted the role the Confederates had in burning the city of Atlanta, an important point of historical debate, is not included in all of the selected textbook descriptions.

When using films, teachers should keep in mind both copyright restrictions for commercial films and where the films were found. Using websites like YouTube™ or TeacherTube™ usually means the film clips are fine to use. If using YouTube™, however, remember it also offers viewers the ability to comment on the film. Some of these comments can be inappropriate for students. A website that prevents these comments from being seen is SafeShare™. Before using any film in your classes, make sure to receive approval from your media specialist or administration. In many schools, clips from movies with over a “G” rating cannot be shown to students without parent permission.

Most textbooks do not offer their readers full sources that allow historic figures to speak for themselves (Loewen, 1995). In this lesson, therefore, I wanted to provide students a chance to read a letter by Sherman where he described his own actions. The best source I found was a letter Sherman wrote to Atlanta Mayor James Calhoun on September 12, 1864 (Civil War Home, 2005). Using excerpts from the letter, I created a short document containing Sherman’s original
text on one side and an updated version written in modern speech on the back. I, additionally, used a large font size to make the paragraph take up the entire page in hopes of making this source less intimidating for student readers. Both of these approaches for using primary sources are supported by Sam Wineberg and the Stanford History Education Group’s webpage Reading Like a Historian (n.d.a). The excerpt from Sherman’s letter exclaims:

…We must have peace, not only in Atlanta, but in all of America. To secure this we must stop the war that now desolates our once happy and favored country. The use of Atlanta for warlike purposes is inconsistent with its character as a home for families. There will be no manufactures, commerce, or agriculture here for the maintenance of families, and sooner or later want will compel the inhabitants to go (Civil War Home, 2005)

The modern interpretation that I wrote says:

…We must have peace, not only in Atlanta, but in all of America. To make this happen we must stop the war that now destroys our once happy and special country. The use of Atlanta to make war equipment is not what a city with families does. There will be no making things (manufacturers), buying and selling (commerce), or farming (agriculture) here for families, and sooner or later having no food, jobs, and money will make the citizens leave (and help end the war).

Step 4: Create a Graphic Organizer

Once you have selected three sources for your Hollywood or History lesson, the next step is to develop a graphic organizer allowing your students to analyze the text while being able to easily compare and contrast the sources once they complete their analysis (see Appendix). In the Gone with the Wind assignment, I use a graphic organizer with four boxes. At the top of the page are instructions describing the assignment. Under the instructions are four textboxes with the headings: “Textbook,” “Gone with the Wind,” “Sherman’s Letter,” and “What do you think? Hollywood or History?”

Step 5: Read the Textbook Narrative

After introducing the topic and reading the instructions, students read the textbook account with a partner. In the textbook box, students should describe what they learned about Sherman’s treatment of Atlanta, writing details from the text. While there are many strategies that can be used to help students locate important information, for this activity having students use the basic: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How approach in a collaborative study would be appropriate.

Step 6: Show the Film

Once students have read, discussed, and written about the textbook passage, they should have enough background knowledge to proceed with the inquiry. Tell students you are going to show a clip from Gone with the Wind offering them a visual account of the capture of Atlanta. Make sure students understand this is a secondary source (just like the textbook). Tell them, for this box, along with answering the essential questions, they need to indicate the similarities and differences between the textbook and the movie. They can do this in a number of ways: writing it out, or drawing lines between the similarities in both boxes. In some cases, you may want to show the film twice or stop and replay important dialog. After showing the film, have students compare and contrast the sources individually for a few minutes then discuss the clip with a classmate and add new information to the Gone with the Wind summary.
Step 7: Analyze the Primary Source

Next, have students read the primary source. Make sure students understand the difference between a primary and secondary source. Let them know they are reading the primary source to allow Sherman to describe his actions. Offer the options of reading the original text, the modern version of the text, or both. After students read the letter, engage them in summarizing the material with a partner. Have students compare and contrast the information from the letter to both the movie and the textbook.

Step 8: What do you think? Hollywood or History?

In Step 8, have students make a judgment about whether or not they think the movie shows an accurate depiction of the capture of Atlanta. Make sure they understand there is no right or wrong answer as long as they provide evidence from their sources to support their responses. The length of the written response is entirely up to the teacher. Teachers who have used this strategy are often surprised by how much students want to write after taking part in the activity. Due to the Common Core’s focus on reading and writing for all students, this portion of the assignment should be an individual activity.

Step 9: Line of Contention

The final step of this inquiry assignment is to allow all students to share their opinions about the historical accuracy of the film. Sharing can be accomplished by using the line of contention strategy. The strategy allows all students to get out of their seats and physically show how accurate they think the film is. On one side of the room should be a poster that says “100% History.” This means students who stand directly underneath conclude the film clip is 100% factual and accurate. On the other side of the room, display a poster that says “100% Hollywood.” Students who stand under this poster conclude there is nothing accurate about the film’s depiction of the event. Students also should be allowed to stand in between both posters (i.e., 50% history, 50% Hollywood) or can stand closer to one side or the other (i.e., 75% Hollywood, 25% history). Once students have taken their place in the line, have a few support their position using evidence from their sources.

Conclusion

Social studies teachers have the opportunity to take the lead in bringing lesson ideas like the one provided in this article to their Language Arts colleagues. Lessons such as the one described allow for authentically integrated lessons focusing on Language Arts standards while incorporating social studies content. Inquiry and document based assessment appear to be in our future so social studies teachers should start developing these types of lessons and using them in their classes immediately (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013; Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2014; Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium; 2012; Stanford University, n.d.b). My hope is that this activity provides an example of one of the many ways inquiry and document based assessment can be accomplished.

An equally important reason for writing this piece is to ask social studies teachers to reconsider how textbooks can be used in their classes. Used appropriately, textbooks can be an excellent tool in social studies education. Inquiry-based lessons, such as Hollywood or History, where the textbook is used as one of many sources, enable students to develop not only the skills required by the Common Core, but a greater understanding of the social studies content being
taught. Most importantly, this type of lesson guides students in how to be critical readers of information from all types of sources, including the dreaded textbook.

References


### Web-Based References


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Appendix
Hollywood or History: Gone with the Wind

Gone with the Wind is one of the most popular books and movies of all time. The tale of Scarlett O’Hara and her struggles during and after the war has captivated audiences since 1939. This famous film, however, offers inaccurate accounts of the Civil War period and those who lived during it. Today, you are going to determine how accurate you think Gone with the Wind is in its portrayal of Sherman’s destruction of Atlanta. Individually or with a partner, watch or read each source and summarize them below. In the bottom square explain if you think Gone with the Wind should be considered an accurate account of history, a Hollywood inspired account, or a mixture of both. Use examples from your sources to explain your answer.