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Exploring the Pedagogical Nature of Historical Texts: Implications for Classroom Teaching

Avner Segall

Michigan State University

History, we all know, is the study of the past. As students pursue their history education, they encounter a multitude of textbooks depicting different eras and, in the case of better history classrooms, also a variety of primary and secondary sources from which to gain a more robust understanding of the complexity of the past and the various interpretations given to it. The latter is an important process that moves beyond simply memorizing facts to an endeavor involving, among other things, discerning fact from opinion, corroborating information, contextualizing that information in the period in which it was written, comparing interpretation across multiple sources, and ascertaining the credibility of sources and its utility in exploring a particular topic. Comparing and corroborating sources and ascertaining their credibility not only helps gain a fuller understanding of the past; it also introduces the very idea that history is contested, that it is constructed (made), and that it carries with it particular assumptions and perspectives about the world it attempts to depict.

Reading pedagogy into historical texts

Such a focus in history education is important because, as we also know, history and the past are not one and the same. Rather, history, as Seixas (1993) explains "is only a discourse about the past, a story constructed to make meaning for us in the present" (p. 307; see also Berkhofer, 1995; Jenkins, 1991). Writing the past inevitably involves a deliberate process of "selection, ordering, and evaluation of past events, experiences, and processes" (Kaye, 1991, p. 71). Meanings given to the past are never objective or neutral; they are always interpretations that advance some assumptions, perspectives, and worldviews rather than others. Consequently, scholars exploring such issues invite historians, as well as those who teach and study history, "to consider history as a literary form, on a par with, or at any rate exhibiting affinities to, other kinds of imaginative writing - narrative or descriptive, comic or realist, as the case may be" (Samuel, 1992, pp. 220–21. cf. Jenkins, 1995, p. 36. See also White, 1978).

While the idea that history and the past are not identical may not come as news to some (hopefully, to most), such understandings carry with them a variety of implications, both for how we encourage students to read history and also, and importantly, for the kind of readings teachers ought to conduct in preparation for their pedagogical encounters with students. For what such understandings imply is that historical texts are not only sources of content upon which to base a teacher's pedagogy. Rather, this understanding signals that historical texts already embody assumptions, perspectives, and worldviews folded into the very process of narrating the past. As such, history textbooks and primary/secondary sources should not be seen simply as teaching students pure content about a topic but as pedagogical invitations for learning - positioning the students to explore that topic, and the world more broadly, in particular ways. In other words, content doesn't only teach us something, it also, and unavoidably, teaches us how to think and what to think about and value when we engage that content. Some of this "teaching," as we will see, is implicit and, at times, can run contrary

to or subvert the very ideas the text might intend to convey.

Let me elaborate on the idea that historical (any) texts already embody pedagogical invitations for learning. In doing so, I will explore both the notions of *content* and *pedagogy* and then move to provide some questions that might help guide your own exploration of the pedagogical nature of curricular content. To foreground this discussion, let's use an example from Todd & Curti's textbook, *The American Nation* (Boyer, 1995), a commonly-used U.S. social studies textbook, that provides this boxed-in paragraph titled "Multicultural perspectives" on the left margin of a page in its chapter, "American Expansionism":

> Native American women who worked in the fur trade often married non-Indian fur traders and played important roles in their societies as a result. For example, Huntkah-itawin, a Sioux woman, married trader James Bordeaux. She helped Bordeaux cement his trading ties with the Sioux, and her access to trade goods helped her brother rise to the position of chief. (p. 318)

While this excerpt surely provides students with information about the role of Native American women the fur trade, the question remains as to whether that is all it does. That is, are there also inherent in the particular information provided (and that withheld), in its language, images, format, and location, various pedagogical invitations that help position students to know some things and know them in specific ways rather than others? I will point only to several of these latter aspects. As this excerpt informs students about a Native American women, it also, both explicitly and implicitly, conveys knowledge about broader societal issues—e.g., race, gender, and class—as well as positions students to engage the information from particular cultural, social, and gendered positions with which to engage the information provided. How, for example, might students be positioned to think about women and gender/gendered relations when the woman described is not presented as significant in and of herself, when her contribution to society is through marriage, in this case to a white man, and where that "contribution," as wife and sister, is only counted when it contributes to the success of men? And what ways of thinking about women and/or Native Americans more broadly, might such a text invoke when it is positioned in a separate box on the margins of the pages rather than within the "formal" text that appears in the center of the page? Might it invite students to think of women and Native Americans as marginal in/to American society, as not central to the American story, as mere add-ons to simply spice the curriculum while not allowing them the central role they deserve?

Or let's take the following three excerpts about the Malays on pages 50-51 of the Singapore Lower Secondary History textbook, *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation Pre-1819 to 1971* (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2007), in a chapter section titled "What part did the different immigrant communities play in Singapore's development?":

The Malays

The Malays were mostly engaged in providing basic necessities like firewood and foodstuff. They also became gardeners and huntsmen. Some were skilled shipbuilders, making ships and boats for the Malay traders to ferry their goods to neighbouring islands. Many of these immigrants worked very hard. Some succeeded in fulfilling their dreams and some did not. Those who did not succeed lived in poverty and hardship till death.

A boxed-in text nearby, titled "A nugget from the past," states:

One fateful night in 1822, Narayana Pillai's shop caught fire. The fire destroyed it and he became bankrupt as a result. Although he was unable to pay off his debt, his business partners trusted him because of his good reputation. With the help of Raffles, and working twice as hard as he did, he rebuilt his

fortune to become one of the richest Indians in Singapore.

The next page (p. 51) recounts the following:

The immigrants who came were poor and suffered from diseases like malaria, cholera, typhoid, smallpox, and tuberculosis. Many of them were lying on the road with sores on their bodies, too weak to move. When they died, their bodies were left on the roads. Conditions were so bad that some Europeans felt it was a disgrace to see so many beggars in a place ruled by a European government.

Motivated by the need to help their less fortunate countrymen, people from the various races, especially the more successful businessmen, came forward to provide social services like hospitals and schools. Some people, like Tan Tock Seng and Syed Mohamed bin Alsagoff spent large sums of money on providing medical services and amenities like water wells for the community. They also spent money to ensure that the poor had proper burials. The establishment of the Paupers' Hospital on Pearl's Hill in 1844 and Thong Chai Medical Institution in 1867 were some examples of care shown by the rich businessmen for the less fortunate. Their acts of philanthropy made life les miserable for those who received help.

As is evident, the above excerpts provide students information about the Malays in early-day Singapore. At the same time, however, they do much more than that: they position the reader, pedagogically, to think about that information from very specific reading positions that, in fact, tell more stories than about the Malays themselves. Indeed, the information provided supports a variety of worldviews that, while perhaps having something to do with the Malays, go much deeper than that, recounting other societal narratives about success, prosperity, and the role of both individuals and the government in taking care of the less fortunate. Underlying the text are various stereotypical (and mostly unflattering) notions about Malays, who the text not only portrays as occupying menial jobs but also uses language that conveys a sense that these jobs were not a reflection of the norms of a society that relegated the Malays to those specific positions. It also, and implicitly, suggests that such positions were all the Malays could amount to—conveying in the process something about the perceived character, dispositions, and ability of an entire group of people. A theme persistent throughout the above excerpts is the capitalist idea of individual hard work to gain success - measures in economic terms - and the idea that it is an individual responsibility - in this case, charity - rather than a collective one to care for the less fortunate. Or if seen as a governmental responsibility, when government does an act of this charge, the form of rectifying the situation is not citizen pressure on the government to act, to rise up to that responsibility. Rather, things are addressed by individual action through charity. The message conveyed is that people are (and should be) responsible for their own lot and that they, rather than social structures or attitudes, are responsible for individuals' success or failure.

In all, both examples help illustrate that texts work in multiple ways - they provide both content and, at the same time, frame that content in ways that, pedagogically, convey particular attitudes readers are invited to assume about the world and its people as they encounter this supposedly "neutral" content.

What makes it necessary to explore these pedagogical dimensions of content used in the history classroom is that it troubles the prevailing understandings among teachers that separate content and pedagogy as two different entities, whereby teachers are responsible for pedagogy while content area specialists provide mere content devoid of pedagogy. If, however, as several scholars in the areas of critical pedagogy and cultural studies have suggested, we take pedagogy to mean not only that which teachers do in classrooms but, instead, conceive of it more broadly, then content area texts, as the above examples demonstrate, must also be seen as pedagogical. Simon (1992), for example, proposes that

pedagogy entails any process "through which we are encouraged to know, to form a particular way of ordering the world, giving and making sense of it" (p. 56). More than the integration of classroom content and teaching strategies, pedagogy, according to Giroux and Simon (1988), "organizes a view of, and specifies particular versions of what knowledge is of most worth, in what direction we should desire, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and the world' (p. 12). In that regard, Simon (1992) adds, "pedagogy attempts to influence the way meanings are absorbed, recognized, understood, accepted, confirmed, and connected as well as challenged, distorted, taken further, or dismissed" (p. 59). Broadly conceived, then, pedagogy would be inherent in any message, contained in any form of action, structure, or text, inside or outside of schools, that organizes someone's experience as well as organizes that someone to experience.

From that perspective, all content, McEwan and Bull (1991) claim, "has a pedagogical dimension" and "all subject-matter knowledge is pedagogical" (p. 318). They explain: "[T]here is no such thing as pure scholarship, devoid of pedagogy." Any scholar, they propose, needs to be concerned that his or her representations are teachable and resonate with others. Indeed, as we have seen from the two textbook examples presented above, content area texts not only permit but encourage those they engage to feel, value and know the other - a Native American woman or the Malays - in certain ways. They do so by providing readers a selectively constructed social reality - social knowledge and social imagery - and establish a position from which students are encouraged to perceive the world. Choices content area writers make, while never fully controlling the ways in which the texts they write are read, nevertheless contribute to readers' meaning-making by inviting them to engage knowledge from a particular social, political, and ideological point of view (Ellsworth, 1990). In that sense, even though there is a difference of kind and degree between a teacher's pedagogy and a text's pedagogy - most obviously, a teacher stands within the classroom, the author of the text does not - both are nonetheless pedagogical.

Implications for classrooms teaching: What's to be done?

Having explored the idea that subject area texts are, by definition, pedagogical, the question still remains as to what that might mean in the lived reality of history classrooms. Primarily, such an idea entails moving from asking questions such as "What does a text mean?" to "How it came to have a meaning?" and to "What meanings does a text make possible (and impossible) through its particular invitations for learning?" Such questions help shift the focus from simply examining what a text says to what it *does*. To illustrate how such an approach can be operationalized, I use a few examples, all of which help determine how subject area texts position students, pedagogically, to know through the explicit, implicit, and null messages (that is, those that are articulated, those that are implied, and those that are absent) embedded in them.

One of the more pertinent, though often overlooked, places to begin is by looking at chapter titles in textbooks. While we might not pay much attention to titles, they play an important role in directing students' engagement with the material to follow. Take, for example, the title of a chapter depicting the encounter between European Americans and Native Americans in the United States as the former moved west. How might a common title, "Opening the West," encourage students to consider that encounter? To what degree does its wording - especially the combination of "opening" and an assumed closure (after all, there's no need to open something that is not closed to you) - presuppose an initial deliberate refusal by Native Americans to accommodate settlement of European Americans in the west? How might it invite students to expect, if not accept, the use of force in the process of that "opening" and of occupying lands once inhabited by others? And how might implying that Native Americans actively closed the west to European Americans, depriving them entry at

the outset, then legitimate the closing of Native Americans in reservations as a result of that "opening"? How, on the other hand, might another common title for such a chapter, "Westward expansion" - with "expansion" implying an infringement on someone else's space - invite students to consider that encounter differently, as it ascribes different motives and value to the two groups involved? My point here is not to evaluate the "correctness" of each of these titles but, rather, to illustrate that titles matter as they actively position students to engage the content and those depicted in it in particular ways, even before students have actually encountered the content described in that chapter.

Pedagogical invitations are also inherent in the descriptions of individuals, groups throughout the textbook. The kind of adjectives attributed to them, the perspective from which they are portrayed, where they are portrayed (following all other perspectives that have been presented? As a side bar?) and how (in neutral, negative, or positive terms?), all send powerful messages that encourage students to think and imagine in particular ways. Similarly, who gets to speak about, for, with, or to whom in textbook depictions has important pedagogical implications as to what and how students come to know. For example, are the Malays in the excerpt presented earlier portrayed from a dominant viewpoint? Are they spoken about, for, or at? Is the portrayal one they would feel comfortable with and endorse? Might they select different language to represent themselves? If so, what might such a representation entail? How similar/different might it be from the one presented in the textbook?

While it is important to consider what and how a text utters and which world it brings into focus through that utterance, it is as important to consider what a text chooses not to say and the topics and people it selects to ignore. This is not simply in order to supplement the text, as teachers often do, with additional and alternative perspectives but, also, to critically examine why such absences exist, what they imply, and what and who they serve. As Willinsky (1998) points out, when a U.S. social studies textbook ends its exploration of China in the sixteenth-century (to be resumed only for the Boxer Revolution, Mao's take-over, and Nixon's visit to China), such absences are often considered simply an oversight, mere missing information (after all, we can't be expected to teach everything about everyone). What these absences promote is a form of thinking that only explores the other (in this case, China) in relation to us (the U.S.) and, in the process, invites students to ignore the very implication of Western colonialism both in Chinese history and in its current construction in Western textbooks.

Questions to ask of history/historical texts

To help illuminate the pedagogical nature of history as an enterprise as well of the historical texts it helps produce, I will, in this section, suggest several questions that might guide such an illumination. While these questions are ones I believe are important to incorporate in your interactions with students in classrooms, it is, I propose, doubly important that you, as teachers, also explore them as you prepare for instruction. This is because the kind of answers you derive by asking these questions will help determine which histories/texts you choose to include in your teaching and how to use them to maximize student learning.

You might wish to begin by asking some broad questions about the larger history curriculum used in your classroom: Whose history is depicted, from what and whose perspectives? Who does it elevate/marginalize? What is missing (the null curriculum), what is glossed over and ignored? What is trivialized? What larger discourses and political purposes does the history discussed promote? What do answers to the above questions tell us about the underlying interests that structure how and who we encounter in history and when? Why are women and minorities normally not included in textbooks and, if they do, are often relegated to the sidelines or boxes? To what degree do texts used in history classrooms speak at/about those they depict? Who gets to speak about/for the "Other"? Why do most U.S. textbooks extensively explore capitalism while much less

space is devoted to labour issues? And when labour issues are presented, from whose perspective are they presented - from that of labour or capitalism, the strikers or the government/business community? Or why do history curricula include so much about wars but rarely mention or promote peace?

The same kind of questions we ask of the larger history curriculum ought to be asked, with more specificity, of the particular texts used in the history classrooms. Asking such questions becomes even more pertinent when using textbooks since they are often seen by students as authorless and objective. Indeed, as Wineburg (1991) illustrates, students see textbooks as "just reporting the facts . . . just saying what happened . . . [simply giving] straight information" (p. 501) and that interpretation, and the various assumptions, perspectives, and worldviews that underlie it, have little to do with what is presented on the page. And when students believe that textbooks are true and authorless, there is no one (or nothing) for them to "argue" with, to question, to challenge. So they accept things are objective, value-free, and true.

In what follows, I borrow heavily from a framework proposed by Walter Werner in his article, "Reading authorship into text," published in *Theory & Research in Social Education* in 2000. It provides, I believe, the most useful, comprehensive, and thoughtful heuristic to date with which to explore the various pedagogical issues I have been engaging thus far. I have selected here to focus on five elements of his framework: representation, the gaze, absences, authority, and intertextuality.

Representation: Creating a text involves a variety of choices. Everything a text says and where and how it says it helps produce both meaning and reading positions. Questions you might pose regarding the issue of *representation*: What is the text purporting to depict? What did the author want readers to understand and value through this depiction? What might this text tell us about the perspectives, values, assumptions and interests underlying this text? In what ways might this text serve a set of larger societal goals, issues or interests? Is there evidence to suggest whose views and experiences are advanced and celebrated or ways of life favoured and which are not?

The gaze: The idea of the gaze addresses the implied stance toward the people, places and events the text depicts. Questions you might pose regarding the notion of the *gaze*: What gaze is implied in this text - Ethnocentric? Patriarchal? Stereotypical? Paternalistic? Dismissive? Romanticized? Nationalistic? Would those represented in this text embrace this representation? In what ways does the text speak *about*, *at/to*, *with*, *for*, or *as* those being represented?

Absences: Absences speak to that which is not present in the text. Absences are important because what is absent from the text might be as significant as what is present. Questions you might pose regarding a text's *absences* might include: What is (or whose perspectives are) missing from this text (the null curriculum)? What may account for these omissions? Whose interests may be served by these omissions? In what ways might including those missing perspective alter that which is represented?

Authority: A text gains its authority and its ability to tell a particular story and have readers accept it by portending to remain neutral through the use of textual devices such as captions, headings, metaphors, images, and footnotes. Questions that could highlight the idea of *authority* might include: What rhetorical devices are used to persuade the reader to believe in this story? Has the text directly helped and/or obstructed readers from questioning its narrative (use of hedges, hesitations, the insertion of "I")? What other storylines might be possible to depict this similar event, place, person, or group?

Intertextuality: Intertextuality speaks to the ways in which the various elements of the text do (or do not) combine to convey meanings. Questions that could surface issues of *intertextuality* might include: In what ways do the text's various elements - paragraphs,

titles, visuals, headings, review or end-of-chapter questions - help tell a consistent, seamless story, or do they? How do they help suggest a particular meaning and/or multiple, even opposing, meanings? In what ways is one's reading of this text influenced by its particular intertextuality?

Conclusion

The above categories and questions (for a complete heuristic, please see Werner, 2000) help open the text to the pedagogical issues underlying it and illustrate the ways in which it helps position students to know and not know. In that regard, answers to these questions help demonstrate that texts brought into the classroom are not pure works of content awaiting pedagogical transformation by teachers. Rather, they are, in and of themselves, pedagogical invitations for learning. Working with or against those invitations, teachers' pedagogies do not initiate the pedagogical act but add further pedagogical layers to those already present in the text. Such an understanding, as I have suggested throughout, and the questions Werner proposes, help move the reading of historical content in more meaningful directions and, in the process, allows student to not simply explore texts as individual speech acts but, rather, connect them to the broader societal discourses that give rise and meaning to the particular meanings they are attempting to convey and to the kind of readers they hope to produce.

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