

Down With Textbooks

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When it comes to teaching history, nothing destroys student interest faster and more completely than a heavy reliance¹ on textbooks.

During my first three years of teaching high-school history I would see students' eyes glaze² over as we reviewed from a 1,000 page textbook. Five years later, I don't blame them. So much is wrong with history textbooks, I hardly know where to begin, but here is my short list.

1. Textbooks present history as unchanging, but as time passes, our understanding and interpretation of the past constantly evolves.
2. Textbooks are one-sided, offering a top-down, often white-male-centric³ view of history.
3. Without a thesis⁴ or any semblance of argument, textbooks don't accurately reflect how most scholars⁵ (at least good ones) write and present history. Teachers should assign readings that model effective historical writing.
4. Most importantly—and this merits repeating—textbooks are boring and intimidating⁶.
5. Textbooks can serve as a crutch for teachers who don't know history or the historian's craft.

I find affirmation from James W. Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything*

¹ reliance: noun: dependence on or trust in someone or something

² glaze: verb: become glassy, go blank

³ centric: adjective: in or at the center

⁴ thesis: noun: a statement or theory that is to be maintained or proved

⁵ scholar: noun: a specialist in a particular branch of study; a person who is highly educated

⁶ intimidating: adjective: frightening or overawing (to someone), esp. in order to make them do what one wants

Your American History Textbook Got Wrong. “The stories that history textbooks tell are all predictable; every problem has already been solved or is about to be solved,” he writes. “Textbooks exclude conflict or real suspense. They leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character. When they try for drama⁷, they achieve only melodrama⁸, because readers know that everything will turn out fine in the end.”

Loewen has a theory⁹ on why textbooks thrive, despite their deficiencies¹⁰: “They meet a need, but it’s a need that should not exist. It is the need for teachers who are not, first and foremost, teachers of history or social studies,” he says. He adds that his own high-school American history teacher didn’t care how he taught American history, that the school system didn’t care about how he taught American history, and that he was hired and fired on the basis of the basketball team’s record. This isn’t to say that textbooks don’t include information. They are chock full of information (however one-sided), but herein lies a serious problem. With so much dense, mind-numbing text, too many students give up trying to understand what’s really important.

Teachers who depend on textbooks are likely to test what is in the textbooks: long lists of facts. They tend to give long multiple-choice tests that evaluate students’ memorization skills, not what they have actually learned. To do well, students memorize mountains of facts. Worst of all, in my experience, success on these tests isn’t an accurate indication of what students will remember the following week, month or year.

I learned this lesson as a rookie-teacher, before rethinking my textbook-heavy approach. A returning senior asked if she could retake the United States history final. She had earned an “A” just three months prior, but after a long summer, she wanted to know how much she remembered. My once-shining star had devolved into an average student. Little deep or lasting learning had taken root, and I began to understand why. She really didn’t care about the content—at least not enough to put any real effort into retaining her knowledge. And why should she have? After all, doing so would have meant revisiting Alan Brinkley’s 13th edition of *American History: A Survey*, her boring Advanced Placement United States History textbook.*

⁷ drama: noun: an exciting, emotional, or unexpected series of events or set of circumstances

⁸ melodrama: noun: a sensational dramatic piece with exaggerated characters and exciting events intended to appeal to the emotions

⁹ theory: noun: an idea used to account for a situation or justify a course of action

¹⁰ deficiency: noun: a failing or shortcoming

While I was earning my BA¹¹ and MA¹² in history, I never learned primarily from any one book, and certainly not any textbook. My professors made learning exciting, always assigning a diverse, thought-provoking array of primary¹³ and secondary¹⁴ sources. For me, that made my understanding of history more meaningful, and thereby lasting. I learned to internalize information, not merely store it in my short-term memory.

Last week, I talked about textbook-based history learning with Dr. Aldo Regalado, my colleague in the history department at Palmer Trinity in Palmetto Bay, Florida, and a history teacher at the University of Miami and Florida International University.

“I have never taken or taught a college-level U.S. history course that earnestly used a textbook—ever,” Regalado says. “I provide my students with context using far more efficient means, and then they go deep into case studies, either by reading primary sources or, better yet, by engaging in their own independent research, writing and presentation projects. They come out of that experience with a real passion—a real sense of ownership and an appreciation for questioning and deeper thinking.”

There has already been some movement towards this approach at the AP level. Next fall, the College Board will introduce a redesigned AP U.S. history exam. This change is happening in part, the company’s website says, to “relieve pressure and free teachers to engage students deeply in exploring, understanding, and interpreting major historical events.” I strongly support assessing students on more relevant skills, especially historical interpretation¹⁵ and periodization¹⁶. I hope this encourages more teachers to move away from textbook-based learning. I also like what I hear from Suzanne Sinke, an associate

¹¹ BA: noun: Bachelor of Arts: a degree program in liberal arts; BS: Bachelor of Science

¹² MA: noun: Master of Arts: a degree after the Bachelor’s degree; MS: Master of Science

¹³ primary sources: noun: primary sources are original materials that have not been altered or distorted in any way. A primary source can be a person with direct knowledge of a situation, or a document created by such a person.

¹⁴ secondary sources: noun: secondary sources are documents or recording that relate or discusses information originally presented elsewhere. A secondary source contrasts with a primary source. Secondary sources involve generalization, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, or evaluation of the original information.

¹⁵ interpretation: noun: the action of explaining the meaning of something

¹⁶ periodization: noun: the attempt to categorize *universal history* or divide time into named blocks. However, determining the precise beginning and ending to any “period” is often arbitrary.

professor of history at Florida State University and Co-Chair of the AP U.S. History Curriculum Development and Assessment Committee. “There is still a body of knowledge that is tied to the curriculum, but the emphasis will be based much more on skills,” Sinke said. “It moves us toward making this not so much what you have memorized, but what you have learned.”

If high-school history teachers want to prepare students for college-level history courses (which I hope all of us do), we must abandon textbook-based learning in favor of assigning and teaching from a myriad of sources. My students purchase *The American Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, a significantly slimmed-down version of Brinkley’s AP U.S. History textbook. It’s still over 800 pages, but the pages are much smaller (not that this makes it any less of a textbook).

Still, I don’t over-rely on Brinkley, nor do I assign every page or chapter. I certainly don’t give multiple-choice tests. Instead, I give students supplemental readings, which serve as their main learning tools. I elicit excitement by assigning exciting sources, such as *Action Comics #1*, which I use to help teach about Judaism and immigration in the early-to-mid 1900s. During a unit on the Cold War, I have students analyze and find sources to better inform their understanding of singer Barry McGuire’s rendition of “Eve of Destruction.”

In an age where information is instantaneous, cheap and easily accessible, history teachers will need to do even more to guide students toward credible sources. We must also help students pursue worthy questions in the context of areas that interest them, even at the expense of giving certain periods short shrift. In that environment, there is little need for a textbook-based approach. Students aren’t slaves to a textbook, eventually forgetting a large chunk of what they store in short-term memory. Instead, the learning becomes more meaningful, engaging and lasting by being depth-centered, not breadth-centered.

Teachers should always inspire students to learn more about their subjects. Unfortunately, an overreliance on textbooks accomplishes just the opposite.

Ah, college textbooks, the fine print on your college bill. It literally sickens me thinking about the literally thousands of dollars I've spent on college textbooks during my college, ahem, journey. Everywhere I've gone, students always complain about the high costs of textbooks and the low (if any) re-sale value. Still, there's a lot of work to be done to bring down the costs of textbooks and the elephant in the room is still the textbook manufacturers themselves.