

Teachers as Scholars: Recognizing the Quality of Pedagogical Exercises in U.S. History Textbooks

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Chapter 1 of the South Carolina Social Studies Curriculum Standards (2000), entitled “Teaching and Learning Social Studies,” offers an opportunity for prospective teachers at all grade levels to reflect and act on what is meant by powerful teaching and learning. Among several recommendations, the standards state that teaching and learning is powerful when it is active (p. 9). This recommendation can prove especially significant as teachers develop lesson plans. Textbooks play a significant role in those plans because teachers rely heavily on textbooks (Sewall, 2000; Loewen, 1995; Tomlinson, 1993; Zevin, 1992; Sleeter and Grant, 1991; Cuban, 1984). Therefore, teachers need to be aware of the quality of textbooks, not only in terms of coverage and content, but in terms of the pedagogical exercises contained within.

Adopting principles from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position paper entitled, “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy” (1993), the South Carolina Standards explain that active teaching and learning involves teachers developing lessons that require students to manipulate information in a variety of formats and engage in higher-order and critical thinking (pp.11).

Can textbook pedagogical exercises provide a means for promoting active teaching and learning? Pedagogical exercises refer to activities found anywhere in a chapter including around any visuals, in the columns, at the end of chapter sections, or at the end of chapters. Pedagogical exercises provide one means for determining the manner in which students are held accountable for the material contained in the text and/or the material they are required to learn. Textbooks that include pedagogical exercises provide opportunities to analyze questions with regard to process. Process tells us what the questions actually direct the students to do, and whether students are asked to simply recall information or engage in higher level thought.

The quality of pedagogical exercises in U. S. History textbooks has largely gone unexplored. However, my research (LaVere, 2004) examined nearly 700 pedagogical exercises relating to Native Americans in thirteen U. S. History textbooks currently used in South Carolina’s public school in grades three, four, five, eight, and eleven (see references for a listing of those texts) The results of that study offer an opportunity to reflect on the quality of pedagogical exercises.

Do Textbook Questions Engage Students in Higher-Level thinking?

In the study, Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) provided the analytical tool for determining the “level” of questions that appeared in the textbooks. The six levels include “knowledge,” “comprehension,” “application,” “analysis,” “synthesis,” and “evaluation.” Only knowledge level questions were considered lower level. The remaining five levels

were considered higher level questions. Using this methodology, the study found that 91% of those pedagogical exercises were recall (see List 1). Among the various grade levels, the elementary texts had the highest percentage of lower level questions, 98%. All but two high school texts (Danzer's *The Americans*, and Viola's *Why We Remember*), contained lower level questions at a rate of ninety percent or more. Following are some examples (List 2) of lower level questions from textbooks of various grade levels.

List 1
Pedagogical Exercises
Taxonomy of Questions

Grade Level	Author	Lower level		Higher level		Total Questions
		#	%	#	%	
HS	Boyer II	36	90	4	10	40
	Cayton	74	90	8	10	82
	Danzer	82	80	21	20	103
	Suter	26	93	2	7	28
	Viola	78	82	17	18	95
MS	Appleby	84	99	1	1	85
	Stuckey	66	92	6	8	72
	KH-8	34	94	2	6	36
ES	Banks	18	95	1	5	19
	HB-5	22	96	1	4	23
	HB-4	93	98	2	2	95
	HB-3	5	100	0	0	5
	KH-3	8	100	0	0	8
Totals		626	91	65	9	691

List 2
Lower Level (Knowledge) Cognitive Questions

High School:

What were four of the earliest civilizations in the Americas? (Suter, *Fearon's History of the United States*)

Middle School:

Name three foods eaten by Native Americans? Who was the medicine man? (Klein and Horne, *South Carolina: The History of An American State*)

Elementary School:

How did the Trail of Tears get its name? (Harcourt Brace, *The United States in Modern Times*)

What was the religious leader called who led the Navajo ceremonies? (Harcourt Brace, *Early United States*)

The study also provided numerous examples of the similarities and differences in pedagogical exercises among the various grade levels. One would expect to find a greater degree of sophistication at the higher levels. However, such was not always the case. In an examination of the texts, it became evident that textbook writers covered similar themes and pedagogical exercises were used to reflect those themes. The “Impact of the Horse on Native Americans,” was one such theme. A question from an elementary textbook (Harcourt Brace, *Early United States*) read, “How did the horse change the Indians’ way of life?” A question from a middle school text (Appleby’s *The American Journey*) read “How did horses change the lives of Native Americans who lived on the Great Plains?” and from a high school text (Danzer’s *The Americans*) a question read “How did the horse influence Native American life on the Great Plains?”

Do Textbook Questions Offer Students Opportunities to Engage in Critical Thinking?

The South Carolina standards explain that “active” teaching and learning involves opportunities for critical thinking. Many textbooks did provide “critical thinking” exercises, but did the questions really offer opportunities for students to think critically? Among several scholars who do so, Barry Beyer (1985) defines critical thinking as “the assessing of the authenticity, accuracy, and/or worth of knowledge claims and arguments.” The basic processes involved in all types of critical thinking are the higher level cognitive skill of *analysis* and *evaluation*. Analysis is defined as the “breaking down” of communication into its parts in order to study the relationships of those parts. Evaluation is the measurement of the value of a communication (piece of information, opinion, etc.) according to some criteria or criterion. The several textbooks that used the designation “critical thinking” or “thinking critically” failed to define the term, nor did the questions pass the litmus test for critical thinking according to Beyer’s definition.

In Cayton’s *America: Pathways to the Present*, a critical thinking question asked: “What problems were typical of Native American communities in the 1960’s?” (p.861). Danzer’s (*The Americans*) critical thinking questions used verbs like “analyzing,” “evaluating,” and “hypothesizing.” Under “hypothesizing,” for example, the question was asked: “Why did Native American societies not wish to sell or buy land?” (p. 13). In both questions, (recall questions, actually) according to Beyer’s conceptualization of critical thinking, neither provides enough information for students to analyze or evaluate, and both questions really lack the analysis component.

The critical thinking exercises in middle school textbooks suffered from the same inadequacies as those of the high school texts. For example, Appleby’s text (*The American Journey*), asked the question: “Do you think it was fair for white Americans to force Native Americans to relocate? Why or why not?” (p. 346). One of Klein and Horne’s (*South Carolina: The History of an American State*) questions read: “Why do you think that belief systems are important to a culture?” (p. 71). One of Stuckey’s (*Call to Freedom*) critical thinking questions read: “Why do you think the Ghost Dance was important to American Indians in the West?” (p. 549). Some questions did have analytical components, and some did assess the value of information. Individually, however, all lacked the combined required components.

Harcourt Brace's elementary series used critical thinking subtitles like "think more about it," and "personally speaking," and "cause and effect." In the fifth grade text one question read: "How would you feel if you were made to change your way of life? What would you do?" (p. 261). The fourth grade text included the question: "Why do you think it was important to plan a buffalo hunt?" (p. 91). The third grade text included the following question: "What might people who live near each other have in common?" (p. 192). Each question might involve higher level thinking skills, but like the higher level texts, each lacked the components necessary for critical thinking.

Yet, the textbook landscape is not entirely bleak. Several textbooks did contain higher level questions. For example, Cayton's high school text (*America: Pathways to the Present*) included the question: "Discuss how Europeans' opinions about Native Americans and Africans differed from the facts about each of these cultures." Stuckey's middle school text (*Call to Freedom*) contained a question that read: "Why do you think most American Indians on the frontier chose to support the British? How did this affect the war?" A question in Harcourt Brace's third grade text read: "How was the Great Council of the Iroquois like a city council?" In addition, recent textbooks have a substantial number of visuals, primary source documents, and statistical data that provide opportunities for creative teachers to develop strategies that lend themselves to higher order and critical thinking exercises for their students.

To reflect the powerful teaching and learning principles of the National Council for the Social Studies and the South Carolina Social Studies Curriculum Standards, then, prospective teachers (as well as current teachers) must take the responsibility for acquiring and maintaining a high level of scholarship in their discipline. Included in this responsibility is recognizing the limitations of textbook pedagogical exercises and developing their own questions and strategies to help engage their students in higher order thinking and critical thinking exercises.

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Textbooks Reviewed

High School:

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Middle School:

- Appleby, J., Brinkley, A., & McPherson, J. (1998). *The American journey*. New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill.
- Horne, P., Klein, P. (2000). *South Carolina: The history of an American state*. Selma: Ala.: Clairmont Press.
- Stuckey, S., & Salvucci, L. (2000). *Call to freedom*. Austin, Tex.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Elementary:

- Banks, J. (2000). *A nation grows*. New York: McGraw Hill.
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