

# IN SEARCH OF A BETTER HISTORY BOOK

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history-social  
science

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The first time I sat on a textbook adoption panel I spent 45 minutes deliberating. I remember that a significant part of my consideration was the quality of the lunch that the publisher gave us and the fancy test bank that promised to cut my prep time in half. With 50 research papers to grade sitting on my desk and no clue how I was going to make my lesson for the next day on the New Deal seem anything more than an endless list of acronyms, I spent less than an hour considering my choices and then cast my vote for the test bank king. I didn't give my selection another thought until the next year when I tried to teach Washington's Farewell Address and found that the textbook we'd picked devoted a total of one paragraph to the topic. It was at this point that I realized that the textbook adoption process was not just another task to take care of and cross off my list of things to do in a day. The absence of real consideration and deliberation meant that my colleagues and I were stuck with a less than useful text – a text that wouldn't be replaced for close to a decade.

I suspect that many teachers made a similar decision in prior adoption years – and lived to regret it. Like most things in education, choosing instructional materials is an extremely important task for which we have little to no time to devote. At stake is no less than the primary resource for both students and their parents outside of our classroom. Given the decreased instructional time many schools have devoted to history in the last few years, combined with the opportunities that a well-written text can pro-

vide for increased student literacy and disciplinary understanding, it's a responsibility we must take the time and consideration to make.

In our work with historians and linguists, nothing has caused more surprise (and frustration) than when we ask university scholars to consider both the History-Social Science Standards and the adopted texts for a given grade level and ask them to design a presentation that puts them both to use. One analysis of junior high school history textbooks suggests that textbook history "is neither a story nor is it about people. In the process of arranging, interpreting and generalizing from recoverable facts, people are effaced, actions become things, and sequence in time is replaced by frozen setting in time." University scholars and experienced teachers alike often complain that the text students have available to them does not provide the substantive and thoughtful narrative needed to explain significant historical movements and disciplinary concepts such as causality. Instead, textbook chapters can frequently devolve into a list of seemingly disparate information. This is why it's so important to select committee members with extensive grade level experience. The experienced 10<sup>th</sup> grade world history teacher knows that Standard 10.3.2, for example, requires that the textbook provide more than a list of inventions of the industrial revolution; it requires an explanation of why these inventions came about, the relationship between the inventions and societal change, and the overall significance of the technological revolution.

Along with substance, high-quality materials offer their readers an engaging text. Contrary to what seems to be the trend toward an increasing busy and distracting format, students deserve a compelling narrative. "Market research" so the adage goes, suggests that today's students need colorful graphics, crazy fonts, and an endless array of textboxes highlighting questionably significant historical figures in order to keep reading. It's curious to note, however, the popularity of engaging books such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which feature no textboxes, Times New Roman 12 point font, and keep kids reading all the way through to the end of their 500+ pages. I realize that writing fiction and writing textbooks jam-packed with all of the required historical content are two different things, but I wonder what students would think if publishers took a chance on ignoring market research and just wrote the good story that history really can be.

### **Providing the Tools for All Students to Access the Curriculum.**

Another major challenge for the adoption committee is finding a text that both provides access to challenging and historically significant concepts while acknowledging the significant challenges posed by low levels of student literacy. We are all too familiar with the misguided notion of watered-down historical text: primary source quotes with more ellipses than sentences, complex arguments boiled down simplistic sound bites. The excitement of historical investigation lies in the gray areas of humanity – leaders who wrote eloquently about human rights while codifying slavery, bloody battles carried out in the name of religion, and the unexpected social impact of technological and industrial change. Textbooks can't teach all of these nuanced and complex concepts, but they should try to provide even the best teachers with help as their students' main resource.

Well-written materials cannot only provide access to struggling readers, they can provide tools for teachers seeking to increase their students' literacy. In our work with history teachers across the state, we've learned that while a majority of them expect their students to be able to write a reasonable argument using a thesis, evidence, and analysis, few of their textbooks offer models of this high-level genre of historical writing to share with their students. Indeed, our broader analysis of the research in this field (Coffin, Veel and Coffin, et. al) suggests that many textbooks rely upon the more simplistic genres of chronological narrative, or at the most, relatively simple definition or cause and effect genres. A helpful activity in the textbook adoption process is the random analysis of selected passages throughout the

book. Do you find examples of higher-level historical writing, such as explanation and argument? Is it easy to identify an author's thesis and evaluate his or her argument by considering the multiple examples of evidence provided in the passage? Can you take notes or write an outline from the passage? How easy would it be for a student to glean both the basic historical information from a selected passage, in addition to more complex and less literal information such as the relationship between events, patterns in history, or overall significance?

### **What about the Bells and Whistles?**

As I wrote earlier, one of my chief considerations in my regrettable decision those many years ago was the significance I placed upon the test bank offered by the textbook publisher. Test banks, interactive CDs, teacher workbooks and online support are all very appealing to teachers and when well done, can be extremely helpful. However, just as adoption committees consider the quality of the textbook, the same level of scrutiny must be placed on the ancillary materials to determine their real significance and value. Will the additional materials help students meet and deeply understand the historical content as outlined by the standards? Do they provide challenging, creative, and time-saving ideas that will genuinely help kids and make a teacher's busy day just a little easier? Or, do they offer suggestions for extension that have proven to be less than helpful in the past, such as the familiar "Imagine you were a [fill in an historical stereotype here]. Write a letter home...."

Finally, as my mother always reminds me as we enter Costco, while the per unit cost may be relatively low when you buy in bulk, it's not a bargain if you can't use the 100 extra gallons of olive oil. Financial incentives that publishers can offer to encourage districts to pursue publisher fidelity – one company for all grade-level texts – may not be such a deal if all of the books aren't of the highest quality.

A careful consideration of the textbook choices available to your district is a time-consuming and challenging task in an already busy and often chaotic schedule. Given the needs of our discipline, our students, and our schools, however, it is time that we must take seriously and conscientiously. If we don't, a significant opportunity to provide high-quality tools to our talented and hard-working teaching staff will pass us by and our students will spend yet another decade with a substandard resource that they don't want to read. I hope at least one of us will give up the nifty test bank in exchange for the well-written book. Our children deserve nothing less.