'Reading' Textbooks: Developing as Curious, C ritical Readers of History

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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am a History teacher educator and convenor of the Post Graduate Certificate of Education at the University of Cape Town. I also chair the Newly Qualified Teachers Programme which supports NQTs through their first year in the classroom – any beyond. Originally, I am from the UK but came to South Africa in 1994 to do research for my PhD and stayed. I am committed to working with pre- and in-service teachers to help bridge the gap between theory and practice in that space between schools and universities and education departments. I am also a national examiner and currently part of the team tasked with re-writing the national history curriculum with an African-centred focus. I am fortunate to live in a very beautiful city, between mountains and sea and forest in which I taught at a High School for fifteen years before a stint in a provincial education department.

Keywords Reading like a Historian, Textbook Analysis, Historical Thinking, History Education

INTRODUCTION

The brief for this paper was "What do they (I) do with History and Social Studies textbooks in their (my) educational spaces"? Engaging with this question has allowed me to think about how textbooks might be used in high school classrooms as 'primary' and 'secondary' sources to develop learners as critical readers of history.

Like any other historical account, history textbooks present an ideologically constructed interpretation of the past (Apple & Smith, 1991; Foster & Crawford, 2006). They are a form of 'discourse' that produces or constitutes knowledge and meaning about the past, which,

in this case, carries authority and influence because of their official status and use in school classrooms. Through the selection (of people, images, interpretations), textbooks construct 'a' truth about the past while, to a large extent, presenting their narrative as 'the' truth.

In the classroom, this ideological construction of textbooks and the authorial positionality of their writers can be made visible to learners by comparing two or three textbook accounts of the same historical event. Learners use quite simple strategies of 'annotation and tabulation' described below to enable learners to (literally) deconstruct the text. This shifts both their viewpoint and point of view and makes the constructed nature of history more visible. This allows a space to think about the alternative meanings conveyed when the story is told differently and consider on what basis one interpretation is presented over another.

THE RESEARCH

Most of us working in History Education are by now well acquainted with Stanford History Education Group's (SHEG) 'Reading like a Historian' (RLH) methodology of 'Sourcing, Contextualising, Close-Reading and Corroboration' for working with historical source material.[1] It is a valuable heuristic device for moving students' engagement with historical documents beyond basic comprehension and the extraction of 'facts' towards selecting information as evidence to answer an inquiry question. However, I have seen that students at all levels benefit from additional scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976, p.98) when it comes to textual analysis ('Close-Reading') to better read 'between the lines', 'against the grain', 'beyond the text' as well as 'reading silence' and 'authorial intent'. As space is limited, I will discuss just one activity to scaffold one of the guiding questions given in the SHEG 'Historical Thinking Chart': 'How does the document's language indicate the author's perspective?' Asked so 'that learners should be able to evaluate author's word choice; understand that language is used deliberately'.

Case Study: The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956)

The Montgomery Bus Boycott is often seen as the start of America's Civil Rights years. How is this significant event/process told differently in two South African (Sources A and B) and one USA textbook (Source C)? What questions are generated from observing these differences?

There is no space to discuss the process of Sourcing and Contextualisation, the initial classroom activities, which I refer to in my classes as 'reading outside the box,' and first reading of the texts, so we are jumping straight into the scaffolding activities to better enable 'Close Reading'.

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[1] The 'Historical Thinking Chart' can be accessed at https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/historical-thinking-chart

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Step 1: Annotation of Source material (including but not limited to the examples below)

Learners start their close-reading by annotating the selected textbook extracts, which have been photocopied onto a single sheet (see sources A, B and C at the end of the paper). This activity could be done individually or in groups.

    (a) Highlight all the individuals and groups mentioned in the three texts

    (b) Circle words used to describe the individual and groups

    (c) Underline anything the individuals or groups did or experienced

    (d) Put a 'spot' above any 'causes' of the Montgomery Bus Boycott you can identify in the text[2]

Step 2: Tabulation

Learners move highlighted information from the extracts identified in Step 1 onto a series of tables. This repositioning of the text provides learners with a different way of seeing the narrative accounts (literally as well as figuratively). It brings into view aspects of their construction, the emphasis and omission, which provide an entry point for discussion about meaning and purpose. Space precludes my including all the tables generated from the annotation process; however, many examples are given below.

2:1 Extraction Learners extract the name of any individuals or groups mentioned, the words used to describe them, and what they did or experienced (annotation activity (a), (b) and (c) above) and place their answers into a table. In a classroom, this process of extraction and tabulation would be repeated for all three texts. The exercise could be done individually in groups or a digital space (see Table 1).

Table 1 An example of the extraction of information from Source A

Sourc	**Who** is identified? (a)	Words used to **describe** the individual/group (b)	**What** did they do / or experience? (c)
A	Rosa Parks	Secretary of NAACP	Was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man
A	White Man		(it is inferred that a 'white man' expected Rosa Parks to give up her seat to him)
A	African American Community Leaders		Met at Baptist Church, organised a bus boycott
A	Martin Luther King		Selected as leaders and spokesperson of boycott
A	Business owners		Experienced severe economic strain
A	African American Commuters		Faced hardship because they had to walk or hitchhike to work
A	US Supreme Court		Ruled that segregation of buses was unconstitutional

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  [2] There is not space to discuss classroom activities which encourage complex thinking about relative causality; however, card sorting activities such as the one described in Chapman, A. (2003). Camels, diamonds and counterfactuals: a model for teaching causal reasoning. Teaching History, (112), 46 remain useful.

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Through this initial recontextualizing of a single source, learners start to see that some people or groups are described in more detail or given greater agency than others. The power of the activity, however, is when the tables complied from different textbook extracts are compared.

2:2 Comparison Research into the characteristics of expert and novice historical readers has shown that 'Corroboration' of evidence is one of four disciplinary reading skills ('heuristics',) practiced by academic historians when they study accounts from and about the past Wineburg (1991) . It is, therefore, an important competency in developing learners as 'Historical Thinkers'. Introducing annotation and tabulation exercises to source-based classwork is one way to make the similarities and disparities between accounts more visible and provide valuable scaffolding for learners as they develop their skills of 'Corroboration'.

This, however, is only the first step when nurturing historical thinking skills. Ideally, through questioning and discussion, teachers should guide learners from identifying **how** the accounts differ to considering **why** they may differ. This will lead back to asking questions about the provenance and purpose of the source, then to asking questions about **the effect** on the reader of those differences (How does each version make you feel about the people involved or the actions they took? How does language choice influence the images of events conjured as you read the different accounts?), which raises questions about the power of authorial choice and **the 'uses'** to which history is put.

Now, to return to the classroom activity, having first extracted information from the textbook sources, learners are asked to reorganize the information so that they can easily see similarities and differences between the sources. Below is just one example of the three tables created for annotations (a), (b) and (c)[3] (See Table 2)

The comparison even of these three short texts can make visible the choices made by the textbook authors and enable learners to better understand that 'language is used deliberately'. So let's just pause here and consider some of what has been surfaced by this process.

Learners will have noted from tables created for annotation (a) and (b) the omission of large numbers of people in the telling of this story, the emphasis on individuals as agents of change and how differently they are described.

In the table created from annotation (c), the issue of agency is made explicit. While in the South African textbooks (A and B), Black individuals and groups 'organised' the boycott. They are given no such agency in the USA textbook (C), where even Martin Luther King Jnr was 'thrust into the black revolution'. Similarly, the role of white people as allies or as violent opponents of the boycott is only mentioned in one of the textbooks.

And so on. What can start with identifying differences can lead to a classroom discussion of what Surprised, Interested or Troubled (SIT) learners about what they see, and to asking the why? So what? Who else? Type questions. It is an opportunity to explore concepts of 'significance', 'causes and consequences' and discuss the meanings conveyed. Also to consider how our affective responses to the different representations are influenced by our positionality (based on age, race, class, gender, religion, nationality etc.).

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[3] The other tables showed which individuals and groups were selected for inclusion and the words used to describe them in the three textbooks

Table 2 A table showing the words used to describe the action and experiences of selected individuals and groups mentioned in the three textbooks (Annotation (c))

Selected Individuals and Groups	Source A (SA)	Source B (SA)	Source C (USA)
Rosa Parks	'Was arrested for refusing to give up her seat'	'moved the battle for equal rights from the law courts to …the streets' 'was arrested and convicted of breaking segregation laws' 'inspired other people' 'spent most of her life fighting against injustice'	'made history' 'boarded a bus, took a seat in the 'whites only' section and refused to give it up.' 'her arrest for violating the city's Jim Crow statutes sparked a year long boycott'
Martin Luther King	'the protest's leader and official spokesman'	'was elected as the first president of the Montgomery Improvement Association'	Was 'thrust…to the forefront of the black revolution'
Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)	'Organise a complete boycott of the buses'		
African American Community	African American commuters too faced hardships…had to walk or hitchhike to work	'Formed the Montgomery Improvement Association and organized a boycott'	'would no longer submit meekly to absurdities and indignities of segregation'
White Community		'white racists tried to crush the boycott by setting churches in black communities on fire'	
Supreme Court	Ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional	Ruled that segregation on buses was against the constitution of the USA	

This activity involves extraction, reorganization and tabulation of textbook text and is a revealing process. However, although this comparison makes visible to learners that textbook writers 'silence' stories, people, and processes through their omissions, they will need access to additional sources of knowledge outside the textbook to 'read' those silences. This is where the knowledge they (and the teacher) bring to schools from home, communities, media, and other reading comes into play. Teachers can ask their classes what knowledge they have of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which is not mentioned in the textbooks and why they think these individuals or groups are omitted while others are included? Textbook activities can be the introduction to further research on the topic, which recognizes alter-

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native sources of knowledge and enables new or previously hidden histories to be shared.[4]

IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

Wait Werner (2000) argued that "representations [of the past] are 'made' and not 'given,' particular as opposed to universal, perspectival rather than a gods-eye view, partial instead of complete" (p.196). This activity aimed to use textbooks as 'primary' sources to draw learners' attention to the constructed nature of historical narratives (representations of the past) and, through enquiry, enable their development as critical readers of history. Nothing written in the three textbooks is a 'lie'. It is not 'inaccurate' or 'error,' but the authors' interpretations – seen in their selection, ordering, emphasis and omission - convey different meanings about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. These meanings, however, can remain unexamined in history classrooms when textbooks are mined for 'facts'.

Finally, the hope is that classroom activities such as this will create historical curiosity and that the contradictions which have been surfaced will generate new questions about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the textbook authors and their representations of the past, and the societies in which these texts were produced to teach history to school children.

Q & A WITH KATE ANGIER

Question #1:

Teacher's Question:

You utilize a resource called Reading Like a Historian for the article. This resource utilizes different primary and secondary sources for each student activity. Do you believe that using different textbook resources in these activities/modules could impact (positively or negatively) student outcomes and why?

Kate Angier's Response:

Textbooks are, too often, considered to be the ultimate authority on past events by learners, and even some teachers. The statement 'that's what it says in the textbook' tends to end, rather than begin, a conversation in history classrooms.

I want to encourage history teachers and learners to replace the (often used) analogy of 'doing history' as equivalent to doing a jigsaw puzzle with the understanding that a single, correct, picture of the past can never be recreated. A close reading of different textbooks can demonstrate for learners that when historians (or textbook authors) write histories they make choices, and that writing history involves the selection of 'facts' or 'details', and the construction of a narrative and not every writer will make the same choices. They can all look at the same source material relating to an event in the past and still tell the story

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[4] I fully acknowledge that there needs to be a discussion about the evidential basis of new knowledge; this activity aims to read textbooks as 'primary' sources to reveal their constructed nature and de-bunk any notion for learners that textbooks convey 'the' truth and more than any historical account.

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differently—but not necessarily incorrectly—because they are asking different questions or applying a different interpretive lens. This is historiography. How the story is told matters:

- Who and what is included?
- Who and what is left out?
- What language is used to describe people and their actions?
- Why have these elements of the story been selected?
- Whose interest do they serve?

These are important questions for learners to start asking. Once learners start to see that 'interpretation' is not the same thing as 'error' we can start to have a conversation about the theoretical lenses which inform different schools of historiography. We can also start talking about the use of history and its abuse.

Therefore, I suggest that this close-reading activity has several potentially positive outcomes. It helps demystify textbooks as the transmitters of 'unquestionable' truths but also helps to develop the critical reading skills we want our history learners to acquire, for both disciplinary and civic purposes.

Question #2:

Teacher's Question:

You mention that often meanings can remain "unexamined" when textbooks are mined for "facts." How would you recommend textbooks balance reporting facts while also delving deeper into specific subject areas? For example, should textbooks only provide surface-level knowledge and be supplemented with other materials or should textbooks themselves attempt to cover more subjects more thoroughly?

Kate Angier's Response:

There is always going to be a tension, for both textbook writers and publishers, between breadth and depth, between using the page allowance for delivering information about and for providing interpretations of the past – especially in a content-heavy curriculum. This is because textbooks are commercial as well as cultural and educational artefacts. Much can be done now in online spaces to provide additional resource material to 'open up' the information presented in history textbooks, but often the decision whether to make this available freely to all teachers and learners is driven by economic rather than educational imperatives. Even with a generous page allowance, it is difficult to do justice to the complex historiographical debates and provide sufficient archival evidence in the form of source material for learners to examine. This is where the websites established by specialist education NGOs or digital archives curated for school use are so invaluable and need to be supported.

A school textbook can provide a good starting place, but it should not be where we end our historical inquiry. Studying history is not only a question of learning about what happened in the past, or even about how and why those events have been interpreted differently, but also about the meaning and significance of those events for different people at different

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times. This is the difficult work of teaching history which requires the skilled mediation of knowledgeable history teachers. While some textbooks are definitely better than others, no textbook on its own will ever be entirely adequate.

Question #3:

Teacher's Question:

You mention mandated testing and how students have traditionally performed poorly when it comes to comparing interpretations and perspectives as it relates to different sources and authors. The standard you reference is South African, but similar standards are also found in other countries. How do you think textbook sources could improve student outcomes (comparing/contrasting interpretations and perspectives) outside of only offering more sources for students to analyze?

Kate Angier's Response:

Incorporating different voices from the past through a range of source material is very important. As important, however, is what questions are posed and what tasks learners are asked to perform using the available source material. This is what will determine whether their historical thinking is developed. As I show in this activity, simple annotations and graphic organizers can be used to extract information from multiple sources (in this case textbooks). Learners can then use writing frames to write this up in answer to a simple comparison question.

For example, a standard question in a South African national exam might be: "How do Source A and B differ in their explanation of who initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott?' Learners would be rewarded fully for saying" 'In Source A it mentions that X was responsible for initiating the Montgomery bus Boycott, whereas in source B it says that Z was responsible'. But this is only the first step to be mastered. If teachers, textbooks, and exam papers stop here then learners are really only practicing a simple literacy equivalent of 'spot the difference'. What is important, for the development of a disciplinary way of thinking, are the follow-up questions:

- Who wrote these accounts and on what historical evidence did they base their claims?
- Why do you think that X is identified in one source and Z in another?
- How do the different versions change our understanding of the events?
- Where should we look to find out more about these interpretations?

It is the questions posed by textbook authors or teachers, as well as the source material included, that will make the difference in learning outcomes.

Question #4:

Teacher's Question:

Could you more fully explain your use of the term historiography using the Loewen text you discussed?

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Kate Angier's Response:

A standard definition of 'historiography' is 'the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Here, a few elements are important to note; writing history involves the 'critical examination of sources, and those sources should be 'authentic'. However, it will always require a 'selection' from which the historian will construct a 'narrative'. In most cases, these narratives may stand the test of critical methods for a time but will be revised either as new information comes to light through the discovery of different sources, or when new questions are asked of existing sources. In other words, to use historian Alan Megill's term, history as a discipline is an 'unresolving dialectic' (Megill, 2016). The idea that history is an ongoing debate with and about the past can be challenging for school-age learners, who tend to want certainty and the correct answer to comprehend. However, in my opinion, oversimplified single stories of the past have no place in the development of critical disciplinary thinking, nor in the schooling systems of complex and heterogeneous societies.

Question #5:

Teacher's Question:

I am wondering about how you might extend this activity. For example, I can see maybe asking students to complete an essay about finding texts of a subject and completing the process on their own, or rewriting the section of all three texts to make it a more "complete" history. How do these suggestions fit with your vision for using historical textbooks? What other extensions can you recommend?

Kate Angier's Response:

This activity could be assessed at some different cognitive levels but also lends itself to more discursive pedagogies that encourage learners to explore their questions. Certainly, answers to 'Why?' questions could be written up in essay form, and learners could be asked to write their version of the textbook entry. It would be helpful to have learners practice writing up simple paragraphs in which they compare the content. Additionally, a range of strategies such as a fishbowl discussion, café conversations, or even hot seating would allow learners to explore the 'why'?' behind the different representations and selections made by the textbook authors (taking into consideration the textbooks' origin) and to consider how the section and representations affected their understanding of the events as well as the emotions experienced as a result of those selections and silences. This process might involve more reflective activities such as journaling or a silent conversation. These learner-centred pedagogies are, in my view, essential in history teaching but are more challenging to assess using the forms of standardised testing, which have become a dominant form in most education systems.

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I have one final suggestion. This activity aims to help learners see that the textbook authors made selections and choices, but it does not introduce a range of new information to fill the silences or offer alternative information to complexify and critique the narratives. Ideally, learners would be able to explore the boycott using a range of primary and secondary sources, which 'open up' all the textbook accounts. This will depend, however, on the accessibility of source materials in different school contexts.

APPENDIX

Textbooks as Historical Sources[5]

Source A

An extract from a South African school textbook Grove, S., Manenzhe, J., Proctor, A., Vale, P., & Weldon, G. (2013). *Via Africa History Grade 12*, pp.178-179

Montgomery is in Alabama, a southern state where segregation laws were still strong in 1950s. Theatres, school, parks, restaurants and buses were all segregated. On 1 December 1955, **Rosa Parks** – secretary of the local branch of the NAACP – was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to **a white man**. The next night **African American community leaders** met at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to organise a complete boycott of the buses. They chose **Martin Luther King junior** as the protest's leader and official spokesperson.

The boycott lasted 381 days, placing a severe economic strain on the public transit system and downtown **business owners**. **African American commuters** too faced hardships because they had to walk or hitchhike to work and the shops. The lucky few managed to join carpools.

The Boycott finally ended on 20 December 1956, when the **US Supreme Court** ruled that segregation on the public buses was unconstitutional.

Figure 1   Grove et al. (2013)

Source B

An extract from a South African school textbook, Bottaro, J., Visser, P., & Worden, N. (2013). *In Search of History: Grade 12, Learner's Book*. Oxford University Press Southern Africa, pp.133-134

It was the action of a single woman, **Rosa Parks**, who moved the battle for equal rights from the law courts to the people in the streets. In 1955, while travelling on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to **a white man**. This was in open defiance of a law that was in place in the southern states at the time. She was arrested, and convicted of breaking segregation laws. **The black community** of Montgomery formed the **Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA)** and organised a boycott of the city's bus system. **Martin Luther King Jnr**. Then a local minister in Montgomery, was elected as the first president of the MIA. The boycott lasted for a year, with people either walking to work or sharing lifts, and the bus company lost 65% of its profits. **White racists** tried to crush the boycott by setting churches in black communities on fire, and the police even arrested the black leaders, including King.

Meanwhile civil rights lawyers fought the case of **Rosa Parks** in court. Eventually, in December 1956 the **Supreme Court** ruled that segregation on buses was against the Constitution of the USA. The action of **Rosa Parks** inspired other people to realise that they too could stand up for their rights. **Parks** spent most of her life fighting against injustice. She died in 2005 at the age of 92.

Figure 2   Bottaro et al. (2013)

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[5] Annotations for (a) (b) (c) and (d) shown

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Source C
An extract from a United States of America school textbook, Kennedy, D. M., & Cohen, L. (2015). *American Pageant*. Cengage Learning, pp.857-858

The South saw little of that progress in the early post war years—but, increasingly, **African Americans** refused to suffer in silence. On a chilly day in December 1955, **Rosa Parks**, a college-educated black seamstress who had long been active in the NAACP, made history in Montgomery, Alabama. She boarded a bus, took a seat in the 'whites only' section, and refused to give it up. Her arrest for violating the city's Jim Crow statutes sparked a year long black boycott of city buses and served notice throughout the South that **blacks** would no longer submit meekly to the absurdities and indignities of segregation.

The Montgomery bus boycott also catapulted to prominence a young pastor at Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the **Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr**. The twenty-seven-year-old seemed an unlikely champion of the downtrodden and disfranchised. Raised in a prosperous black family in Atlanta and educated partly in the North, he had for most of his life been sheltered from the grossest cruelties of segregation. But his oratorical skill, strategic savvy, mastery of biblical and constitutional conceptions of justice, and devotion to the nonviolent principles of India's **Mohandas Gandhi** all thrust him to the forefront of the black revolution that soon pulsed across the South and the rest of the nation.

Figure 3   Kennedy and Cohen (2015)

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