



# Making Good Use of Textbooks: Introduction to the Special Issue on Teaching with History Textbooks

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Johan Wassermann

I am the Editor of Yesterday&Today and the co-president of AHE-Afrika, an NPO working on advancing history education in the African context. I am a Professor in History Education at the University of Pretoria In South Africa. I am also the Head of the Department of Humanities Education. My goal is to develop passionate history teachers that will advance historical thinking in their classrooms and, in so doing, advance school history as an analytical endeavor. In my professional development, my scholarly work focuses on history textbooks, youth and history, and teaching issues of controversy in the subject. Before joining academia, I taught high school history and geography. Outside of my professional development efforts, I am married to a fellow History teacher and love rambling and travelling.

### Scott L. Roberts

I serve as a Professor of Education at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, MI. I am also the co-editor of Information Age's Hollywood or History? book series. The series is based on a strategy I developed for effectively using Hollywood film in the social studies classroom. My goal as a teacher educator has been to serve as the go-between for the theory-based instruction found at the college level and the real-world practical teaching that often concerns many pre-service and practicing teachers. In my own practice, I also try to search for ways to create lessons that incorporate and blend ideas from each viewpoint and hope that the educators I work with find them to be worthwhile. I am interested in state history, inquiry-based practices, and educational technology. Outside of my professional pursuits, I am married to an awesome entrepreneur who runs her own beverage company selling craft beer, cider, and small batch wine in Southwestern Ontario. I enjoy watching soccer and



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college football, and am an avid weightlifter, cross-fitter, and long-distance walker. Before teaching at the University level, I taught 8th grade Georgia studies for eight years and a Social Studies Program Specialist/Teaching American History Grant director for three. I currently live in London, Ontario.

How does one pay homage to the late James W. Loewen (2 June 1942—19 August 2021), one of the original thinkers and thought leaders about History textbooks? One way is by means of a mini-Festschrift, which is a collection of writings in honor of a scholar such as this special issue of ASSERT dedicate to History textbooks. Loewen changed the way History textbooks were viewed irrevocably with *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1995), which was republished in 2007 and 2018. In this, he laid bare how textbook producers and authors powerfully propagated one-sided views of History that were in many instances mythological. The audience for these histories were invariably White American audiences. In a follow-up work, *What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks & Get Students Excited About Doing History* (2009), Loewen advanced arguments on how school history should be taught in a student-centered manner, with a focus on specific historical issues, so as to advance the subject beyond “tyranny” of textbooks. We, the guest editors salute James Loewen and appreciate his seminal work in the area of textbook analysis by means of this special issue on History textbooks.

It can be argued that the tool in social studies education that is often the most vilified is the common basal textbook. Social studies textbooks have been described in the literature as boring, overused by classroom teachers, and contacting significant biases and inaccuracies (Alridge, 2006; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Fitzgerald, 1979; Loewen, 1995, 2010; *New York Times*, 2020). While the editors of this special issue understand and often agree with these critiques, in our prior work we have also offered suggestions about some of the strengths of textbooks. We have, for example, provided practical ideas for how textbooks can be used effectively as one of many sources in inquiry-based lessons and activities (Bentrovato & Wassermann, 2018; Bertram & Wassermann, 2105; Chiponda & Wassermann, 2015; Fru & Wassermann, 2020; Halsall & Wassermann, 2018; Maposa & Wassermann, 2014; Roberts, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Roberts & Elfer, 2018, 2021; Roberts et al., 2022).

Through this special issue, we were excited about the opportunity to add to the literature concerning best practices for using textbooks in the social studies classroom. We have included five excellent articles by teachers and teacher educators who provided practical strategies and practice on how they used textbooks in their own work. We were also fortunate to receive articles that focused on various levels of history education. All of the articles in this issue offer both classroom teachers and teacher educators useful ideas about the best practices for textbook use in the teaching and learning of history.

In the first article, classroom teacher Kate Van Haren offers a description of how she used a textbook analysis with her fourth-grade Wisconsin state history students. Using multiple textbooks and a local painting they learned about the different perspectives of Jean Nicolet over time. In the second article, Jessica Ferreras-Stone describes how she uses the



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“sanitized” narratives found in textbooks as a launching point for her preservice teachers to understand the need to include more complex texts in their own future elementary classrooms. In his article, Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse engages with a diachronic narrative analysis of the representation of the Belgian-Congolese colonial past in Belgian secondary school history textbooks since 1945. In turn, Kate Angier presented a case on how to read history textbooks so as to develop students into curious and critical readers of the subject. Finally, in her article, Pranitha Bharath turned the gaze to the power of images in History textbooks.

Though often problematic, textbooks can still be a useful tool in social studies education. We hope that the articles in this issue will offer useful ideas for how to use the standard textbook effectively at the elementary, secondary, and university levels. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or comments.

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