

Re-Tooling the Social Studies Textbook

DAVID C. KING

In most of our nation's schools, students encounter at least some information about the long list of issues and concerns that make up America's societal agenda. Chemical dumping, nuclear energy and nuclear weapons, various forms of environmental disarray, the rights of minorities and women, war and peace, the global dimensions of the food-population equation, aging, crime, urban woes—these are among the topics likely to be presented in the classroom, more specifically in our social studies courses and textbooks. Most of us in education have accepted the premise that young people need some knowledge in these areas in order to function effectively as individuals and as citizens of a democracy. The trouble is that the results we get from teaching about issues have been disappointing. Students do not emerge with the kind of civic and global literacy we hoped for. On the contrary, they remember little of the issue-oriented information they have encountered.¹ They are unable to make connections between a unit on, say, food and population and their own lives or concerns. The most prevalent student reactions to their confrontation with these pressing issues are disinterest, a sense of helplessness, and apathy.²

Students find that their negative responses are reinforced by the attitudes of many adults, including educators. Recently, the president of an education organization that deals with issue-related topics and materials stated that student apathy is both justified and realistic because only scientists and government officials are capable of taking effective action. "The students

themselves," he concluded, "cannot make a difference now except insofar as they become scientists and government officials."³

If anything can put "a nation at risk," it will be a generation of high school graduates who lack the will or the capacity to confront those issues that profoundly affect their lives. Fortunately, the majority of educators do not seem willing to throw in the towel and turn the decision-making process over to the experts.

However, we do need to find—especially in our textbooks—more effective ways to help students understand issues in order to provide them with a sense of the possible and with the capacity for effective action. I believe that our three most urgent needs are to:

1. Break away from our traditional emphasis on *coverage*, which has increased dramatically with our concern over the "basics."
2. Reassess our reasons for dealing with issues—the goals we hope to achieve and how we can best achieve them.
3. Clarify the ways in which grappling with issues can best become a means of equipping students with the thinking and coping skills this age demands.

We have traditionally regarded history and the social studies as the "problems" courses—those dealing with a seemingly endless parade of problems and issues that trouble our nation and the world. In teaching about these concerns, most social studies teachers follow some combination of two basic approaches. Two recent surveys indicate that 70 percent of class time involves work with the text material; if supplementary materials, often provided by the same publisher, are added, the percentage climbs to 90–95.⁴ The other approach

Textbooks can't possibly give up-to-date treatments of issues, and the media deal only with today's stories. What we need in textbooks is a broader perspective of the factors affecting us today and tomorrow.

is reflexive, a scrambling for materials and strategies when some new crisis leaps out from the headlines.

Both the reliance on textbooks and the crisis mentality associated with headline events are major reasons for our failure to deal educationally with issues. A closer look at these flaws shows how deeply the problem is rooted in our traditional patterns of schooling, but it also suggests some promising alternatives.

The Limitations of Textbooks

As the author of a dozen textbooks in history and social studies, I am convinced of the value of textbooks as teaching tools. But the textbook format does not lend itself to social-scientific exploration of complex topics; serious weaknesses inherent in the very nature of textbooks make them the wrong tool for such a task. Some of these weaknesses are well

David C. King is Director, Curriculum Design for Tomorrow's World, Inc., Hillsdale, New York

Linda Bartlett

"If anything can put a 'nation at risk' it will be a generation of high school graduates who lack the will or the capacity to confront those issues that profoundly affect their lives."



known. The pressures of the adoptions system, for instance, lead publishers to avoid controversy, which often results in a presentation of an issue that is so "safe" it is little more than a mind-numbing series of bland generalizations. Student disinterest may well begin here. Few texts present a realistic grappling with hard realities or difficult choices—and such texts will rarely be found on the approved adoption lists.

Textbook authors and editors feel hampered by the constraints of space. Space limitations, for instance, prevent any real airing of opposing viewpoints or the reasoning behind them. Every issue is distilled down to a few information-packed sentences. If opinions are expressed, they are usually brief quotations, which may be distorted by being out of context. (Eisenhower's statement about the military-industrial complex is a classic example.⁵)

Similarly, the textbook has no room to provide essential scientific background for topics like acid rain or chemical dumping. Nor is there space to delve into the economic causes and consequences of an issue like "exporting jobs" when a manufacturer decides to relocate overseas. In other

words, the reader's information is so limited that only the most superficial responses to questions are possible.

Another outcome of the textbook's space constraints is that the authors have no chance to develop a narrative thread—a "story line," biographical sketch, or case study with which the reader can identify. This matter of narrative is critical. It stimulates student interest and enables the reader to encounter believable people in believable situations. This is the key in helping students become aware of the

connections between what is happening "out there" and what goes on in their own lives and communities. Without a narrative strand—and it is shrinking rapidly beneath the weight of our demands for more coverage—issues are likely to seem abstract, remote, and personally unimportant.

Finally, as pointed out by the recent Hudson Institute survey of global issues in current social studies texts, much of the information is outdated.⁶ This is not—as the Institute study implied—the result of some liberal con-

spiracy to spread a "gloom-and-doom" philosophy. Instead, the problem simply reflects the lag time from an author's original research to the final bound book, a gap that usually ranges between two and four years. Since a text will remain on the market for five years or longer, it is not uncommon for students to be dealing with data that are eight to ten years old.

Too Narrow a Focus

Of course, many teachers supplement the text reading with research assignments in periodicals and newspapers. This has always seemed to be a healthy solution, involving students more actively in the search for information. Unfortunately, the news media tend to reinforce the crisis mentality by focusing on headline-producing stories. The result is a teaching emphasis on dramatic, short-range events rather than larger trends that are much more likely to affect us in the future. In 1979 and 1980, for example, a good deal of class time was devoted to hastily prepared units on the Iran hostage crisis. Yet I doubt that those students recall today what they learned then. The standard question has become: "What do you think we should do to settle this crisis?" Few classes discover what they need to know to address the larger implications of that question; fewer still experience what uses could be made of any answers they arrive at.

The point is this: knowing the details of any particular issue is relatively unimportant, according to the survey directed by John Goodlad, 80 percent of that information will be forgotten within two years.⁷ It is far more critical that young people come to understand:

- Our shared heritage—the combination of forces shaping present conditions and future possibilities.
- How the world works—the dynam-

ics involved in a world characterized by sweeping change, by increasing interdependence, and by the countervailing forces of tradition and fragmentation.

Rather than demanding textbooks that continually present more information about the societal agenda and other topics, we could make far better use of texts in helping to develop this broader perspective. In the case of the Iran crisis, for instance, students would have benefited from a text account of what Harlan Cleveland called "the triple collision of modernization."⁸ In every developing society, Cleveland pointed out, there exists a potentially explosive collision between powerful new economic beliefs and deeply rooted religious or social traditions. If students understand how, in this case, modernization works, they acquire an intellectual and psychological readiness to respond to upheaval no matter what area of the world provides the flash point. Instead, the most recent textbooks already present the crisis as one more isolated event or problem to be covered; the only attempt to place it in a larger context is by putting the account under a heading like "Trouble in the Middle East."

Developing a Global Perspective

If our purpose in having students confront the broad range of contemporary issues is to help prepare them for 21st-century lives, the development of a historical and a global perspective becomes an essential foundation for enabling them to make sense of events. Rather than being an imposing volume of information to be absorbed, our textbooks can aid teachers and students in such areas as finding and using evidence; becoming more attentive to the world around us; improving

World Bank Photo by Ron Walzer



skills of observation, careful listening, and clear communication; and gaining experience in individual and group decision making.

This emphasis on learning to process information and on thinking and coping skills has been advocated by nearly all the recent proposals for school change and curriculum improvement. In summarizing the views of 50 leading educators, Harold Shane stated the need in these terms:

In a frustrating and sometimes frightening world, there is a great need for coping skills and techniques. Good guidance and better preparation are needed in the skills of human relations, critical thinking, in dealing with uncertainties, and in learning to choose wisely among alternatives.⁹

An in-depth study of certain issues would still be important to the social studies classroom and its hardcover text. But the goal would not be finding

the "right" answer about an issue, or memorizing it in detail. Rather, the inquiry should demonstrate the methods and value of social-scientific inquiry while developing students' skills in thinking and in placing events in their historical and cross-cultural context.

Any issue that is too controversial for a particular school community can quietly be dropped with no surrender of "academic freedom." The content of any particular issue is not as critical as the kinds of learning being developed. Also, as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching points out, the goal is not "to impose a single set of values ... [but] to help students think clearly about how values are shaped, and how each of us must build, and periodically review, an authentic, satisfying value structure of our own."¹⁰

Can we re-tool our textbooks and adjust our thinking to new goals and purposes for addressing issues? I have made the challenge sound easy. It isn't. Change depends on our recognizing the value of using issues to improve thinking and decision-making skills and to develop historical-mindedness and a global perspective rather than learning the content of particular topics.

Unless we make such a profound change in our approach, we will continue to think of the social studies and social studies textbooks in terms of coverage. Since the mid-1970s, with the first back-to-basics jitters, publishers have felt an unrelenting pressure to supply more and more information. Pictures and maps have shrunk, narrative strands have been eliminated from some books, print has been tightened, and books lengthened. The average high school American history text runs over 800 pages, and the most recent include resource books with an

“Both the reliance on the textbook and the crisis mentality associated with headline events are major reasons for our failure to deal educationally with issues.”

additional 500 pages of tests, instructions, and so on.

This focus on dispensing more information was not invented by the publishers. Rather, it reflects the publishers' reading of what we as teachers, curriculum supervisors, and boards of education have demanded. I believe that the power of the coverage dilemma is one reason why John Goodlad concludes on a pessimistic note that schooling, as we know it, is not "capable of providing young people with the education they and this democracy requires."¹¹ As TheodoreSizer points out, a new emphasis on thinking and coping skills requires a great deal of time and patience. It really means a new role for teacher and students; the latter, he states, "are to

be the workers. They have to get the information needed, make sense of it, use it effectively."¹²

The issue of "issues" seems like a symbol of the ferment within education today. There is widespread awareness of new needs for a new age. We are quick to plunge ahead with eye-catching solutions like buying personal computers. But so far we have not established the consensus needed to shake off some dangerous traditional patterns. □

¹⁰National Assessment of Educational Progress, Education Commission of the States, "citizenship" test results, 1976-81, unpublished. See also James M. Becker, ed., *Schooling in a Global Age* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), chapters 1, 2, 6.

¹¹John Goodlad, *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), chapter 3.

¹²*ASCD Update* 26, 2 (February 1984): 6.

¹³Michael Kirst, "Choosing Textbooks, Reflections of a State Board President," *American Educator* (Summer 1984): 186.

¹⁴Eisenhower's statement is usually presented as the President's warning about the power of the industrial-military combination. In the full statement, however, Eisenhower goes on to say that the military-industrial complex, with constitutional safeguards, provides the basis for the nation's security. See Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 129f.

¹⁵*ASCD Update* 26, 2 (February 1984): 2.

¹⁶Goodlad, *op. cit.*

¹⁷Harlan Cleveland, *The Triple Collision of Modernization* (New York: Global Perspectives in Education, Inc., 1981).

¹⁸Harold G. Shane, "The Views of Fifty Distinguished World Citizens and Educators," *The Futurist* (October 1976): 252.

¹⁹Ernest L. Boyer and Arthur Levine, *A Quest for Common Learning* (Washington, D.C., 1981).

²⁰Goodlad, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²¹TheodoreSizer, "Compromises," *Educational Leadership* 41 (March 1984): 37.

Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.