

# Perspectives from the Profs

## The Toppling Textbook?

Mary Anne Raywid, editor

A somewhat defensive news release from the beleaguered textbook publishers prompts these mournful thoughts: Are textbooks a viable phenomenon? And if not, what can take the place of this substantial pillar of educational practice? The answer becomes more complicated the longer one pursues it because the textbook is integrally bound up with the way we keep school—at least post-sixth grade school. For many teachers it is the textbook which provides the crucial service of organizing instruction—of selecting content, how it is presented, and how sequenced. The text provides not only the subject matter we obviously seek from it; it also supplies the pedagogical ordering principles for the classroom, in selecting and packaging manageable chunks to be learned. For most classrooms in at least some subjects, the textbook also defines truth—what is omitted thereby being relegated to some such negative status as “false,” “of lesser import,” “irrelevant,” or “unsuitable.”

Youngsters seem clearly to need some such selection—not only by virtue of their cognitive limitations (there is no turn-off worse than an excellent book far too difficult for its reader), but also because of their limited motivation—which renders models like a “free market of ideas” tangential at best. One might well desire that the young encounter history and its conflicts by reading one historian after another in preference to a mere textbook. As long, however, as it remains as difficult as it now is to get youngsters to read *anything*, such hopes seem a bit utopian.

Consider the major complaints of Frances FitzGerald in her much-feted study of the history textbook, *America Revised*. She complains that the texts are dull, bland, and similar. Her primary explanation is something the reviews and discussions have minimized: “If you analyzed why they were dull,” she told one interviewer, “it was because the

books were texts in civics and not history.” (*Newsday*, 2/17/80) FitzGerald goes on to add that texts have become “a battleground for all the different social forces in society”—and the resulting pressures on publishers contribute to the blandness. This is the message most of the discussions have stressed, and certainly there is much that can be said for it: the pressures from Rightwingers are notorious and unrelenting; they have been joined in the last decade by new sources—ethnic minorities insistent on particular treatments in the texts; and important signs indicate that new kinds of groups will soon be pressing their cases more forcefully (e.g., workers and consumer groups). But this aspect of the discussion generated by *America Revised* serves to deflect attention from points which are perhaps even more fundamental.

Return to FitzGerald’s charge that history texts are really intended as civics instruction. She is right, of course. Furthermore, what she says is true not only of the texts but of history instruction generally: We teach history not for the sake of history, but for the purposes of molding citizens. Moreover, something comparable might be said of virtually all we teach in schools. We even pride ourselves for *not* viewing subject matter as self-justifying. It is selected on the basis of its instrumental value—its presumed contribution to the creation of a particular sort of person. Thus, it is no minor challenge that FitzGerald brings. Her criticism goes right to the heart of contemporary education, challenging the very ground rules of curricular choice. It exposes a crucial difference indeed over what schooling is for and about.

Some have reported *America Revised* to charge “distortion,” but that seems a misleading reduction. Texts seek to reflect the broad consensus of their time about the events they describe. It would be hard to argue that they should do

otherwise—e.g., reflect a recognizably partisan view or a minority perspective. But this attempt to present a consensual view contributes to the blandness and dullness—and to the periodic changes in textbook content and treatment which FitzGerald makes much of. What the problem quickly leads to is nothing less than such broad matters as “How should history be written?” and “What constitutes the truths for inclusion?”

What is trivia for one may be focal for another. A prime example is the growing interest in “people’s history”—as opposed to the leaders-and-institutions sort that is more common. And what is criterial in ascertaining historical truth for one is not another’s groundrule. Causal significance has been a prime consideration for many historians: People, events, conditions important to the production of *subsequent* situations and developments deserve inclusion; others do not. Only recently have historians come to recognize how such a plausible criterion perpetuates the status and plight of oppressed groups. Some have modified the criterion accordingly, others have not.

It’s no wonder education is in trouble. As all this suggests, the struggles over what should go into textbooks have their roots in much broader and more fundamental issues—about which we also disagree. FitzGerald didn’t come right out and ask, but it is not tangential to inquire, “Ought we have textbooks at all?” If so, aren’t our hopes for the future of our children and our society one legitimate basis for making the choices that must in any case be made about what to teach the young? If not, how do we address the many and complex pedagogical questions the texts’ absence would throw open?

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