

Textbook studies revisited: Close relationship between research, society and politics

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Textbooks matter. Their content, design and educational aims and objectives have changed over time, as have the manner of their production, their role in the classroom, and the ways in which their users acquire the knowledge canonised in them. Today's textbooks coexist or compete with other forms of educational media and are themselves undergoing a process of transformation in the wake of the digital revolution. These developments notwithstanding, research shows that textbooks remain the most important educational medium in schools worldwide, created in negotiation processes at the societal level and delivering the knowledge these societies deem relevant enough to pass on to the younger generation.

Yet, textbooks are more than simply mediators of knowledge. They always contain and enshrine underlying norms and values; they transmit constructions of identity; and they generate specific patterns of perceiving the world. All this means that textbooks are frequently contested, within and between societies, among political, social, religious and ethnic groups.

Textbook-orientated research is a broad and multi-disciplinary field that is difficult to gauge or evaluate as there is considerable disparity on many levels between the various approaches. Authors bring many dimensions and questions to the texts written for textbooks, they derive their specialist knowledge from varying theoretical discourses, they position themselves within different disciplinary contexts and they employ a range of methodological and analytical processes. These many dissimilarities could themselves be used to link typological distinctions. 'Textbook research' does not exist as a clearly delineated research field; therefore the term 'textbook-oriented research' is more appropriate to describe this discipline. On the one hand the term emphasises the field's immense thematic and methodological diversity and on the other it defines the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary dimension beyond the academic university canon.

Textbook-orientated research has neither its own distinct theory nor a specific arsenal of methods; rather it uses approaches from the humanities and from cultural and social studies most appropriate to the issue in question. The prevailing methods remain comparative, hermeneutic and critical text analyses, which allow textbook content to be systematically analysed in order to explore a range of diverse questions. Textbook analysis has become progressively embedded within the cultural contexts of textbook production, use and implementation. This positioning combined with the interrelationship between textbooks and other educational media has forged

associations and revealed parallels between textbook orientated research and current academic, didactic and social developments. The field increasingly employs discourse-analytical approaches as well as methods from fields such as ethnography, media science, visual studies and the social sciences, for instance in the evaluation and impact analysis of textbooks in classrooms, or for quantitative analysis.

Textbook analysis is distinctive from other research fields in that it operates within the areas of overlap and conflict between academic knowledge production and education policy and practice.

Textbook-orientated research is a dynamic field which is evolving rapidly. In the initial decades of its existence, researchers focused primarily on textbook content; over the last ten years a process of diversification has been underway, directing the attention of the field principally towards the contexts in which textbooks are published. Alongside an examination of their embeddedness in their political, cultural and societal surroundings, this entails research on processes of textbook production and reflection on their use in the classroom. Pithily put, textbook studies has come of age, maturing into a field now approached from a broad range of disciplinary perspectives.

1. Textbooks in their Contexts

It appears fairly obvious that textbook-orientated research and textbook revision are closely related. Up until today, textbook revision has been dominated by its aim to liberate textbooks from nationalistic, chauvinistic and biased interpretations in order to contribute towards peace and international understanding. Especially in its early days, textbook-orientated research was deeply influenced by this normative and, in many cases, highly political nature of textbook revision. At the same time looking over past historiography it is clear that textbook-orientated research has always been subject to significant political and thus normative constraints. Textbook-orientated research has been marked by the tension between normative assumptions (e.g. that the improvement of textbooks has a direct impact on learning outcomes), political expectations (e.g. that a good textbook makes a good citizen), and academic objectivity. This tension has been shaped by comparative textbook analysis from the very beginning, whether by the League of Nations during the interwar period, or by UNESCO, the Council of Europe and bilateral textbook conferences in the post-war era. Even though the majority of textbook related research today has distanced itself from this normative and political point of departure, the latter continues to play a key role, particularly in cases of war-affected or post-conflict societies. Here, textbook-orientated research – primarily analyses of stereotyping and enemy images in textbooks and other teaching materials – provides political recommendations for the revision of such materials. In the past decades this has been most relevant for three regions: the Balkans, East Asia, and the Near and

Middle East. There is very recent research on all three regions, ultimately serving to support political and social processes of reconciliation and the reification of textbook contents. In the case of the Near and Middle East, research aims both to support the dialogue between the Arab states and, in the context of Israel and Palestine, to contribute to a mutual understanding of different interpretations of history, objectifying their portrayal. East Asia is another region that has been marked by textbook conflicts for a long time. Since 2001 historians and educators have been discussing controversial issues and developed various bi- and multilateral textbooks and teaching material. East Asian textbook revision activities have caused fierce political debates but have also been a tool to enhance the academic communication between China, Japan, and South Korea. The ways in which textbook activities and academic historical research have contributed to coming to terms with the region's past has been widely analysed over the last decade.

The highly explosive political nature of textbooks and research pertaining to them is, however, not only relevant for cases of textbook revision in contexts of social conflict. A multitude of textbook conflicts – especially in relation to history textbooks – have resulted in so-called “history wars”, waged on a national level within a specific society. These conflicts are essentially disputes over the formation of a national tradition, the securing of legitimisation processes, and the construction of national identity. It is no longer the historical profession that exclusively determines the way in which a nation ought to remember its past but a wide public that uses digital media to resonate about controversial historical events well beyond the context of the specialised academic discourse. Over the last decade, there has been a worldwide increase in public disputes of this kind surrounding the interpretation of historical events and the question as to which interpretations should be included in history textbooks. The Armenian genocide in Turkey, the textbook debate in Greece, the colonial past in France, the role of indigenous population in Australia, or the Enola Gay debate in the USA are but a few examples.

As a general rule, it can be said that the experience of the globalising world and increasing demands to account for the histories of hitherto “unheard voices” from socially, religiously and ethnically disadvantaged groups, have contributed to a questioning of the dominating national narrative. The challenges of the multi-ethnic classroom, as well as attempts to construct supra-national identities, reveal the limitations of a master narrative purely based on national history. On the other hand, it appears impossible to ignore the neo-conservative trend that seeks to uphold traditional national history and prescribe certain identity constructions with a view to sustaining particular national values. Overall, textbook conflicts are not confined to conflict-affected countries or societies in transition where textbook revision plays an important part in enhancing reconciliation. In addition, globalization has led to a new understanding about the nation, the role of historical scholarship and the public awareness of the political dimension of

memory production and, therefore, has a major impact on textbook issues. Textbook-orientated research has started to contextualize the analysis of textbooks and educational media within these developments.

Until now, there has been a distinct lack of systematic studies locating textbooks within their wider social contexts. Only recently scholars have started to explore this new terrain by comprehensively examining textbooks in relation to society, education policy, academia, educational practice and the economy, from the perspectives of scholarship, didactics, educationalists, textbook authors, education policy representatives, and publishing houses. Textbook-related research has also responded to current societal developments. Education systems in Europe find themselves faced with the challenge of addressing the increasingly cultural, ethnic and religious diversity of school classrooms in the light of more heterogeneous (im)migration societies. This especially affects curricula and teaching and learning materials, which have a particularly crystallising effect on issues of inclusion and exclusion. Textbook-related research has begun to explore the extent to which constructions of cultural difference can be found in textbooks and on which social contexts these might be based. Here new issues emerge in textbook-related research—for example, the issue of difference in textbooks, as well as its complex subject matter, classroom implementation, subject orientation, and educational objectives.

2. Knowledge and Values

The last few years have seen an unwavering focus on the question as to how textbooks contribute to national identity construction. National identity forms a strong point of reference here, textbooks being generally understood as key media via which nation-state history policy is reconstructed and conveyed. While scholars called for an analytical distinction between (normative) textbook work and (objective) textbook-orientated research as early as in the late 1970s, normative approaches nevertheless continue to dominate, creating a direct link between bi-polar identity construction and conflict solution (good versus evil) and thus often neglecting self-contradictory ‘underlying assumptions’ within the narrative.

Identity research on the basis of textbooks also reaches beyond the national dimension and is increasingly drawing upon Europe itself as a point of reference. Dealing with the topic of Europe is based on a need to register similarities and differences in perceptions of Europe, within Europe. The aim, therefore, cannot be to construct a supra-national historical master narrative or to establish a unified geographical area, but rather to sensitise pupils to the diversity of European memory and the interpretative patterns of neighbouring countries. Textbook-orientated research has taken up this issue and investigates not only the diverse representations of Europe and Europeanness to be found in contemporary textbooks, but concurrently pursues a historical interest in changes to textbooks from a comparative perspective and thus the converging and

competing perceptions they provide of self and other with respect to Europe. However, research still remains primarily limited to studies investigating how Europe, particularly the EU, is mentioned in textbooks and curricula. Only very first steps are being taken to contextualise this question within the issue of European identity construction and the contradictory nature and diversity of often competing representations of Europe.

Within the context of identity construction, textbook-related research has also been approaching the topic of colonialism, understood by historical scholarship for some years as a European phenomenon. Traditional and biased *master narratives* about the motherland and colonies have been inspired by *Postcolonial Studies*, calls for a transnational perspective, and the cultural turn. Many are challenged by an emphasis on contradictions, ambivalences and a “shared history”. While textbook related research is still primarily concerned with questions of perception—namely, the portrayal of Africans, of imperial and colonial history, and of stereotypes or geographical boundaries it is gradually opening up to transnational and postcolonial theories and concepts.

3. Textbooks in the Context of other Educational Media

The media revolution, beginning in the 1990s, not only brought new challenges for schools, it also influenced the ways in which education is acquired and conveyed. This goes hand in hand with public, didactic, educational and academic debates on the purpose and impact of these new media on educational processes. Educational media research has concentrated, for example, on the potential and limitations of new media in knowledge gain, conveyance and communication via innovative technologies. A key factor here is the question of design and the implementation of integrative learning environments. Textbooks only play a minor role within this field. The mutual relationship between new media and the textbook, user behaviour, and their impacts on learning processes has slowly become a topic of textbook-orientated research.

In contrast, the relationship between curricula and the textbook has been of interest to researchers for a long time. Modern curriculum research, however, which links curricula with political, scholarly and education-related discourses, is still in its early stages in Europe, and has hardly been established at universities. There has been a particularly striking lack of research on the social construction of school(book) knowledge and internationally comparative studies. Curricula are held to be appropriations by educational institutions such as the state, society and academia, and, more recently, as reflections and products of societal transformation processes. Based on questions of curricula legitimisation, this research analyses the processes of debate via which learning contents are determined and defined as relevant knowledge for schools. These studies thus move beyond critical analyses of curricula to include the discursive structures in

which their practical development is executed. For example, one research area is orientated towards civic education, examining how human rights or citizenship concepts influence curricular developments and thus ultimately the contents of textbooks, especially with regard to patterns of inclusion or exclusion. An especially interesting discovery here has been that while curricula themselves have been subject to a process of Europeanisation, the actual textbook implementation in the classroom has been diversely national in character.

4. Conclusion

Firstly, scientific textbook-related research has distanced itself from textbook revision to minimize the influence of political and normative trends. This is not to deny the numerous points of overlap between the two. Particularly in and about societies marked by violent conflicts and in post-conflict societies, textbook revision still constitutes an important means with which to reify the dialogue. While textbook-orientated research provides the scholarly basis here, as well as politically relevant assessments by experts and recommendations for intervening in education policy, these are not its only objectives.

Secondly, textbook-orientated research has been emancipating itself from traditional content analysis, pursuing two new paths with a view to methodological diversity. The first involves locating textbook contents within specific contexts – of society and politics, specialist research and of other educational media – thus gaining access to a wealth of specialized discourses, even while the educational dimension of the textbook nevertheless remains a central aspect. Textbook-orientated research draws on approaches from discourse theory, media studies, the social sciences and cultural studies, using the tools of conflict-, memory-, or transnational research. Self-reflection on the theory of the textbook and the status of textbook-orientated research, however, remain a rarity. Textbook-related research, on the other hand, is pursuing a promising path, especially as it seeks to fill a gap in the area of empirical research on impact and reception. There are also methodological studies that use methods from textbook-orientated research and subject them to critical self-reflection such as those visualising the historical dimension of textbooks as educational media that have altered over the centuries.

Third, textbook-related research has recently turned its attention to mechanisms of textbook production and approval, as well as their impact in the classroom and the role of digital media. Although textbook-orientated research has only taken initial steps in this area thus far, it has succeeded in opening up a new area of research.

Reference:

Eckhardt Fuchs, Annekatrin Bock (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Textbook Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan 2018.