

What is the importance of textbooks? Historical reflections from a geography educationist

David Lambert, Professor of Geography Education, UCL Institute of Education

1. My predecessor at the IOE, James Fairgrieve, an ardent purveyor of regional geography, published a textbook in **1915** called *Geography and World Power*. He sought to “show how the history of the world has been controlled by” geographical conditions.

This reflects what became known and “environmental determinism”, which fuelled imperialist and what we would now easily recognise as racist views of the world.

However, by the **1919** edition, he wrote: “Within the last generation or two, thanks largely to increased ease of communication, the world has become a single system with no part really independent of any other part.”

2. Why am I telling you this? To make two telling points, which I think are relevant to today’s discussions. The first is about what has been called an *anti-textbook culture*, which needs to be acknowledged – and taken seriously. The second point concerns the *professional confusion* that results, because textbooks **are used**, because they are useful (vital); again this needs to be acknowledged and taken seriously.
 - a. *Anti-textbook culture*. There is a sense in which the geography education community has never recovered from a negative feeling towards textbooks, which I think can be tracked back at least to its imperialist past. This arose, in my subject, partly from the discredited paradigm of environmental determinism – through which geography seemed to purvey a ‘single story’ of the world.

It also resulted from what I might call 'regional geography lite', which was perceived to be repetitive, tedious and laden with inert facts ... all listed in the textbook. Norman Graves, in the 1970s, referred to this kind of geography as "a burden on the memory rather than a light in the mind". The trouble is, textbooks got the blame.

This anti-textbook attitude had become firmly sedimented in geography by the later stages of the twentieth century (let's say, broadly the period during my career as a teacher and geography educationist, over 40+ years). Much research to the present day is critical of textbooks, looking at images and text selections and acutely conscious of bias. Research papers have deconstructed geography textbooks – showing their inadequacies and stereotypes.

Nobody in my training ever said: 'don't use textbooks'. But, to this day (magnified by the supposed freedoms and affordances of digitised information) there seems to be an assumption that teaching with textbooks is limiting. It becomes almost a badge of honour to some, to say that textbooks are not used.

- b. *Professional confusion*. So, returning to Fairgrieve, I am very taken by his post 1st World War statement about Globalisation. This is a very modern take on 'thinking geographically'. Any geography teacher using Fairgrieve at the time would have been engaged with an evolving subject discipline, which put the subject contents into a coherent, intellectually robust structure.

So it is interesting that, as far back as 1985 John Lidstone wrote a PhD on *the use of* geography textbooks, in which he identified a sort of professional double-think. Teachers definitely used textbooks to help structure their teaching, he found – in particular the sequencing and organisation of topics and themes within a superstructure of the subject's organisational principles (very important with the crumbling of

the regional paradigm from the 1960s). But at the same time they seemed impelled to deny their significance, being so acutely aware of the perceived risks associated with 'teaching with textbooks'.

3. Perhaps then there is a need for more research on *the use* of textbooks: for they can be used well, and less well. For example, how do textbooks fit into the 'resource ecology' of contemporary geography classrooms? What does the textbook offer and do really well (which busy teachers might find difficult)? And what can be added to this, to enhance the textbook and to bring geography alive?

It is worth noting that research evidence shows that teachers are often constrained in the use of textbooks:

- If pupils do not have a book each (to take home for example) its use is limited.
- If books are designed in a way that foregrounds 'activities' and 'things to do', it ceases to be a place to go for 'answers' or explanations (note Rex Walford's 1995 article¹ *The strange case of the disappearing text*)

4. The effective use of textbooks presupposes that the textbooks are themselves good. I am afraid it is not difficult to find examples of geography textbooks which seem to have no other rationale than to 'cover' the syllabus/specification.

Such textbooks are often poor. They,

- lack any subject-disciplinary rationale, other than preparing for the test (by which I mean there is no indication of the subject's purpose or overarching sense of narrative: the contents are just 'given')
- lack coherent pedagogy (by which I mean a way to approach, and then engage with, the subject matters)
- lack curiosity, or even explanatory power (sometimes, even propagating out of date, re-hashed material)

¹ *Paradigm*, 18 (<http://faculty.education.illinois.edu/westbury/paradigm/Walford.html>)

5. In summary, a 'Three Futures' heuristic is I think very useful (Young and Lambert 2014²).

- I think what teachers are really reluctant about is the slavish use of textbooks, for this implies a **Future 1** curriculum: that is, the 'delivery' of inert, given 'facts'. (We should acknowledge that some [poor] textbooks do indeed do little more than this).
- However, the danger of a textbook-free classroom is that subject matters themselves can become seen as arbitrary, expendable and less important to get right than generic 'thinking skills' or 'learning to learn'. This is a **Future 2** curriculum, which undervalues the important, difficult questions about what we should be teaching children and young people, and how we can get across abstract, challenging ideas to children and young people.
- **Future 3** is concerned with the epistemic rules or procedures of the subject – that is, what makes geographic (or historical, or scientific *etc*) thought powerful: how it helps young people to see the world in new ways (to 'think the not yet thought').

A good textbook helps put this together, underpinning high quality teaching and learning. That is, explicitly showing:

Purpose

Structure and sequence of subject matters

Pedagogic approach

Differentiation, engagement and practice

Assessment opportunities.

² Young, M. and Lambert, D. (2014) *Knowledge and the Future School: curriculum and social justice*, London: Bloomsbury