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of Teaching 9/11: Now and in
the Future**

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9/11 in the Curriculum: A Retrospective

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This article uses a curricular analysis study to examine how the events of 9/11 and their aftermath are presented to secondary students in supplemental curriculum and social studies textbooks published from 2002–2010. Shortly after 9/11, many political leaders and social studies educators advocated teaching about 9/11 and its aftermath because these events provided a unique “teachable moment,” even though there was often bitter disagreement about what ideological messages related to 9/11 should be promoted in the schools. Within one year, many non-profit organizations and even the United States Department of State developed materials on 9/11 that were disseminated to secondary schools. As the first editions of post-9/11 textbooks came out, it was also evident that content about 9/11 and what happened in its wake would be given special attention. To investigate what was being communicated to young people about 9/11 and its aftermath to students, we analyzed nine curricula from the non-profits and the government in the first few years after 9/11, a sample of nine of history and government textbooks published between 2004–06, and then a subsample of three of the 2009–10 editions of these same texts. Major findings include the multiple purposes for which 9/11-related content is directed, the lack of sufficient detail to help students understand 9/11, the lack of attention to many of the controversies that post 9/11 policies generated, and conceptual confusion about the definition of terrorism.

Keywords: September 11, 2011, social studies, curricular controversy, terrorism

Within moments of the attacks of September 11, 2001, it became clear to us that the decisions teachers made to help their students understand what had just happened, who was responsible for the attacks, and what should be done in response were going to be challenging, important, and controversial. On that day, one of us was scheduled to teach an evening methods course for secondary social studies student teachers in their first week of student teaching, and the other was working with more experienced teachers in a rural school as part of a professional development project.

The teachers and student teachers alike described how difficult it was to teach that day. Some teachers were concerned that what was happening was too emotionally difficult for their students and continued with their planned lessons. But most of the secondary social studies teachers we talked with reported watching the television news coverage with their students and struggling to answer the questions the students raised—such as, What is terrorism, Who was responsible for these attacks, and Why did they occur? Many of the student teachers called to request that the evening’s methods class not be cancelled because they wanted guidance about what to teach about the attacks in

the days and weeks to come. One student teacher said, “I know this is a teachable moment, but I don’t know what to teach.”

Complicating an already challenging pedagogical situation, the vitriolic controversies that erupted about the ideological stances of some of the curriculum developed shortly after the attacks made clear that what should be taught to students was going to be hotly contested. There was also, however, widespread agreement that the attacks clearly deserved attention in the curriculum. As Chester Finn (2002, 4) said, “It’s right to teach about September 11th because it was one of the defining events of our age, of our nation’s history and of these children’s lives.” Chuck Tampo (personal communication, December 19, 2003), the vice president of Close Up, a national civic education organization, went even further, arguing, “The way to look at 9/11 was sort of what Sputnik was for the sciences, that 9/11 should be for the civic and social sciences.”

While we recognized that it was exceptionally challenging to teach about 9/11 in the days and weeks immediately after, we did not think that the topic was so inherently problematic that tenets of high-quality social studies teaching should not apply. First and most important, we believed that the attacks of 9/11 merited immediate and sustained attention in social studies classes. When one student teacher reported that her cooperating teacher had insisted that the planned curriculum could not be interrupted, we were stunned. Surely, we reasoned, there are times that

even the most intricately planned curriculum should take a back seat to the more important goal of helping students understand an event of such magnitude.

But a simple exhortation to teach about 9/11 because it was such an important event left open the questions of what to teach and in what ways. What we hoped for after the attacks was that teachers would engage their students actively in inquiry and deliberation around what had happened and what the U.S. and world response should be. We thought it wise for social studies students to explore the developing and contested concept of terrorism by analyzing different definitions and then measuring them against historic and contemporary examples of people labeled as terrorists or actions considered as terrorism. We hoped history students would learn about the history of the Middle East, the legacy of the colonial era and the Cold War, and the role of the United States in the region. We envisioned government students deliberating both domestic and foreign policy options for how the United States should respond and how it should act as a world power with its allies. We wanted civics students to examine how the events were covered in different countries or even by different news outlets and how these media promoted citizens to respond. In sum, we thought it important for students to learn content that would help them understand 9/11 and its aftermath, build conceptual knowledge of the important ideas needed to build this understanding (most notably, the concept of terrorism), and engage in deliberation about the policy choices available to the United States.

This is not to say that the human interest stories and the memorializing of those who lost their lives should be ignored, but we did not think these aspects of the event should constitute the sum total of what students learned. After all, it was clear early on that the consequences of 9/11 were going to be profound and potentially long lasting. This was not a “teachable moment” that would be short-lived, but a turning point that would continue to merit attention in the curriculum for years to come. It was easy to understand why many organizations quickly began developing curriculum materials about 9/11 and that the inclusion of 9/11 content in textbooks would soon follow. We decided to investigate in a systematic way how 9/11 and its aftermath were presented to students in supplemental curriculum and best-selling textbooks—including a set of nine texts published between 2004–2006, and then a subsample of three of the 2009–2010 editions of those same texts. The examination of curriculum and how it changes over time is instructive for a variety of reasons, but chief among them is to document how the school curriculum is an important site for the contestation of which narratives should reign supreme in a society.¹

Major Themes

What we have learned is not surprising. Great attention has been given to 9/11 and its aftermath in all manner

of curricula and in many, although not all, of the revised state standards. In particular, we have focused our attention on how the curricula present what happened on 9/11 and the hard-to-define concept of terrorism. We were also interested in whether any of the important political controversies about the U.S. and international responses to 9/11 were included in the materials, what kind of thinking students were asked to do about the content they were presented with, and more recently, whether the nature of those messages have changed from one edition to the next.

Same Event—Multiple Purposes

What has been more surprising and interesting to us is how the same event can be put to so many uses. The attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath have been appropriated for a wide array of curricular, pedagogical, and ideological goals that generally reflect the goals of the various curriculum producers (Hess and Stoddard 2007). This purpose was particularly true for supplemental curriculum materials. Facing History and Ourselves, an organization that produces materials promoting reflection and dialogue about tolerance and justice, placed the attacks and aftermath within the context of tolerance and understanding. On the other hand, the Choices for the 21st Century Education Project at Brown University focuses primarily on foreign-policy decision-making. Although their materials always look beyond U.S. borders, they are firmly rooted in questions about what the United States should do relative to other parts of the world. Not surprisingly, then, the 9/11-related curriculum they developed focused on foreign-policy decision-making in the aftermath of the attacks. The goals in these materials were consistent with other curricula the organizations have produced, even though the topical focus of each was 9/11 and its aftermath.

In textbooks, the specific content area that texts are designed to support accounted for the quite different uses to which 9/11 was employed. Government texts, for example, tended to include 9/11 in the context of executive power (such as President Bush ordering the U.S. military into Afghanistan) or in discussion of domestic policies (such as warrantless wiretaps used by the CIA under the Patriot Act). By contrast, history texts placed events within the history of the Middle East and global terrorism (world history) or as a unique event in U.S. history.

Insufficient Detail

We also noticed quite a bit of variance in the detail and comprehensiveness of the curricula. Materials produced by nonprofit civic education groups tended to go into greater depth and to include a richer narrative than textbooks, in part because of the space available. A supplemental curriculum could be one hundred pages long (although most were relatively short), whereas textbooks were likely to

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include only a relatively short presentation that numbered a few paragraphs or, at most, a few pages.

Regardless of length, many of the materials were characterized by very strong language to describe the significance of the attacks but with a shocking lack of detail about the actual 9/11 attacks. For example, the textbooks utilized powerful words such as "horrendous plot" (Nash 2004, 928) and "unprecedented attack" (Spielvogel 2006, 968) to describe the attacks. Eight of the nine books described the attacks of September 11, 2001, as historically significant for the United States and the world. In some books, for example, 9/11 is now a "day imprinted on the minds of many Americans," and something that people in the United States reacted to "in horror" (Nash 2004, 910). In others, the emphasis is on how important 9/11 was for the world. For example, one of the world history texts described 9/11 as a "turning point" in world history and a "crime against humanity" writ large (not just a crime against people in the United States; Spielvogel 2006, 968). Clearly, the textbooks' developers sought not only to include 9/11, but also to emphasize its importance as the *defining* event of the recent past (Hess, Stoddard, and Murto 2008).

Within the materials, however, there was little detail about who the terrorists were or the possible reasons for the attack, and little information about victims and the destruction of the buildings. In the first set of texts we examined, more than half did not specifically explain what happened on 9/11, who was involved, or why it happened; only four of the nine texts mentioned how many people were killed in the attacks or who was responsible for them. This paucity of information belies the notion that textbooks always "cover" basic content information. This is especially true in the government and law texts, which contain virtually no description of the events despite including them frequently as examples.

This lack of detail is somewhat understandable for the supplemental materials developed when the attacks were still fresh in memory, but we found this same lack of specific details in the textbooks published in 2004–2006, and then in 2009–2010, and even in those intended for students who might be expected to have little or no recollection of the attacks. Moreover, subsequent editions of the same texts showed that as time passed, the amount of specific information actually decreased (Stoddard, Hess, and Hammer 2011). For example, the 2005 edition of *The Americans* (which was the first edition to come out after 9/11) included the following passage, which was notable for its amount of detail:

About 3,000 people were killed in the attacks. They included all the passengers on the four planes, workers and visitors in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and about 300 firefighters and 40 police officers who rushed into the twin towers to rescue people. The attacks of September 11 were the most destructive acts of terrorism in modern history. (Danzer 2005, 1100)

The next edition (Danzer 2010, 1100) had edited the paragraph down dramatically. It now reads: "About 3,000 people were killed in the attacks—the most destructive acts of terrorism in modern history." Bear in mind, however, that a fifteen year old sitting in a high school class in 2010 was only six years old when 9/11 occurred. We therefore doubt that many students who read these textbooks actually know the details of 9/11.

The Concept of Terrorism

One especially important difference among the materials is how they approached the concept of terrorism. We were particularly interested in (a) whether the materials provided one definition of terrorism or presented multiple and competing definitions, (b) what examples of terrorism were presented, and (c) whether there was alignment between the definition of terrorism and the examples. All but two of the textbooks provided explicit, authoritative definitions of terrorism, whereas two contained no definition. *The Americans* states, "Terrorism is the use of violence against people or property to try to force changes in societies or governments" (Danzer 2005, 1100), whereas one of the government texts includes this definition: "Terrorism: the use of violence by nongovernmental groups against civilians to achieve a political goal" (Remy 2006, 855). Note that there is a significant difference between the definitions, with the first allowing for the possibility of state-sponsored terrorism and the second explicitly limiting terrorism to activities propagated by groups that are *not* part of a government (Hess, Stoddard, and Murto 2008).

Although there are differences among the definitions of terrorism given in the textbooks, none allows for the possibility that its definition could be contested or wrong. That is, the texts present terrorism as an established concept that means the same thing everywhere. By contrast, terrorism is presented as a contested concept in the written materials that accompany the U.S. Department of State video (although not in the video itself) and in those developed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation and the Choices for the 21st Century Education Project (the only three of the materials that explicitly deal with the conceptual meaning of terrorism) (Hess and Stoddard 2007). The Constitutional Rights Foundation introduces the materials with quite a different approach to thinking about what terrorism means:

Because terrorism implies killing and maiming innocent people, no country wants to be accused of supporting terrorism or harboring terrorist groups. At the same time, no country wants what it considers to be a legitimate use of force to be labeled terrorism. An old saying goes, "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter." Today, there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. Countries define the term according to their own beliefs

and to support their own national interests. (Croddy and Hayes 2002, 21)

As this passage demonstrates, a major distinction among the texts and materials is whether students are brought into the debate about what terrorism means and what events and people should be considered examples of terrorism or terrorists. For example, in the Constitutional Rights Foundation's curriculum and in the written materials that accompany the U.S. Department of State video, students are given multiple and competing definitions of terrorism and are asked to determine whether actual and hypothetical events are examples of the concept.

Conversely, while the textbooks give numerous examples of terrorism, they provide no opportunity for students to analyze whether a particular incident was actually an act of terrorism. Even more striking is that many examples of terrorism given in the texts do not match how the book defines the concept. We found that while four of the texts claim that terrorism is conducted against civilians, they include examples that were directed at military targets, not civilians. For example, *American Odyssey*, *Democracy in Action*, and *Glencoe World History* all refer to attacks on the U.S.S. *Cole*, a U.S. naval destroyer, as an act of terrorism. Similarly, *American Odyssey* and *Democracy in Action* state that terrorism is conducted by "non-governmental groups," which would eliminate state-sponsored terrorism. At least two examples in *American Odyssey*, however—the bombing of a Beirut night club in 1986 and the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland—have been attributed to intelligence agents from Libya and led to U.S. military retaliation against Libya and UN sanctions, respectively (Hess, Stoddard, and Murto 2008).

It is misleading for a text to state that terrorism has a clear definition and then to give examples that do not meet that definition. Research on concept understanding makes it clear that there needs to be a connection between how a concept is defined (its critical attributes) and the examples provided (Parker 1988; Taba 1967). The concept of terrorism is particularly problematic (Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler 2004). Although we recognize how difficult that connection is to make with a concept such as terrorism, it is reasonable to expect textbooks to cite examples that support their authoritatively stated definition of terrorism—or to adopt the fact taken in the other materials and explicitly engage students in the controversy about what the concept itself means.

Lack of Controversy Generally

A lack of engagement with contested information or interpretations was another constant, especially in earlier versions of texts. Very little about the 9/11 attacks or the war on terror was cast as controversial (Stoddard, Hess, and Hammer 2011). For example, in the 2005 version of Magruder's (McClenaghan 2005), the decision to invade

Iraq, which in fact sparked controversy, was presented using strong definitive language that made no mention of the controversy:

In 2002, Congress agreed that President Bush should take whatever measures were "necessary and appropriate" to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi dictatorship. It was widely believed that that regime had amassed huge stores of chemical and biological weapons and was seeking to become a nuclear power—all in direct violation of the Gulf War's cease-fire agreement. (2005, 402)

In the 2010 version of the text there was no mention of the weapons. Now the passage reads: "Most recently, in 2002, Congress agreed that President George W. Bush should take whatever measures were "necessary and appropriate" to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and his Iraqi dictatorship" (McClenaghan 2010, 416).

Conclusion

What can be learned from our analysis of these curricula that might prove instructive for future events teachers who want to help their students understand the importance of 9/11 and its aftermath? Moreover, what can we learn from these curricula that could inform the work of teachers and curriculum writers when another event of the magnitude of the attacks of 9/11 occurs? We end this retrospective overview of what we have learned from our study of how 9/11 and its aftermath have been covered in the curriculum by offering some advice to teachers and curriculum writers.

Recall, earlier we focused on the importance of students learning content that would help them understand 9/11 and its aftermath while building conceptual understanding of powerful ideas and engaging in deliberation about policy choices. We believe these same suggestions should apply to other important events that occur in the future.

What is clear from our research is that it will be critically important for teachers to ensure that their students are aware of basic information that will help them understand the event and why it is important. Relying on textbooks to provide the level of detail that is needed is most likely not going to be sufficient, given that few textbooks we analyzed provided enough specific information. The supplemental curricula generally did a better job by providing a rich narrative of what happened, but in some cases this was not the case. Clearly, given the wealth of news sources available online, one option for teachers is to have students read news stories or view news programs from the time. When analyzing materials (whether supplemental or more traditional texts), teachers should focus as much on what is left out as what is included to make a decision about whether the sources will provide enough information for their students and whether the narrative is accurate and as complete as possible.

Second, teachers should identify the important concepts that relate to specific events and make sure that their students are engaging in opportunities to understand them

in their complexity and also recognizing when they are contested. With respect to 9/11, we observed a wide variance in the consistency of how the concepts of terrorism and terrorist were presented. Moreover, many of the materials presented these ideas as settled and widely agreed on, which is clearly just wrong. That being said, there were some materials that did a good job with these difficult ideas, in large part because they included lessons that engaged the students directly in the ongoing debates about the meaning of difficult concepts. One of the textbooks, *StreetLaw* (Arbetman and O'Brien 2005), did a particularly good job in engaging students in issues of constitutional importance related to post-9/11 policies and provided students with data to engage in those debates. We urge teachers to search out and use such materials.

Third, the last thing teachers should do is to treat any recent event as something that is static or, in essence, settled, when the ramifications of that event are still ongoing. Instead, teachers should engage students in examining the event from multiple stances, including a values or moral stance, an inquiry stance to examine evidence, or an identity stance (Barton and Levstik 2004) to work to develop an understanding of the major issues involved as well as the context and how the 9/11 attacks and war on terror affects us as individuals, citizens, and Americans.

Fourth, we encourage teachers to engage their students in the major issues and decisions of the day—be it a foreign-policy decision similar to the Choices model described above to examining issues of constitutionality or ethics or morality that evolve during a time of crisis. It is only through an examination of the multiple and complex perspectives that pervade society, politics, and the media that students will develop the skills and values needed for democratic citizenship. While we examined a few textbooks that did a good job focusing students' attention on controversies related to policy choices emanating from 9/11, it was here that some of the supplemental materials were very strong—which is even more impressive given they were written so soon after the attacks of 9/11, when there was very little support in the political system to suggest that policy choices should be carefully deliberated.

Finally, the most important advice we can give to curriculum writers and teachers is to give key current events the attention they deserve. We are not suggesting that everything in the news deserves time in the curriculum. But we are concerned that so many teachers feel so locked into their already developed curriculum that they fear taking the time to help their students make sense of what is happening in the world now.

Notes

1. Thanks to Mary E. Haas and Keith Barton for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

2. We have reported our findings in detail in an array of book chapters and journal articles and at professional conferences. For detailed information about the key findings from the supplemental curriculum and textbook phases of the study, see Hess and Stoddard 2007. The textbook study is described in detail in Hess, Stoddard, and Murto 2008 and in Stoddard, Hess, and Hammer 2011. For an analysis of the political controversies that erupted shortly after the attacks over how the attacks should be represented in the curriculum, see Hess 2009.

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