

Teacher's Corner: Choosing Texts for Global History or World Civilization Courses

If you are selecting a textbook for next year's world civilizations, global history, or global studies course, what basic questions should you ask? What issues are important? We are teaching these courses not only for knowledge about our world, but also because more and more of our students will meet people from different cultural backgrounds. If those encounters will bring understanding, not hostility, then what they learn in our classes must be accurate and teach an appreciation for cultural differences.

The following guide, the first in a series, suggests basic general points anthropologists would encourage you to consider as you evaluate textbooks. Future "Teacher Corners" will pose questions to ask and biases to watch out for in texts on China, Japan, Latin America, India, Africa, and the Middle East.

For this guide, the examples come from: 1) *World Geography Today* by Robert J. Sager, David Helgren, and Saul Israel. N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989. 2) *Global Insights* by James N. Hantula et al. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co, 1988; and 3) *A Global History* by Leften S. Stavrianos et al. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1979. The texts represent respectively a geographical, cultural, and historical approach.

1. Basic Orientation

Who are the writers? the consultants? Each textbook has a particular orientation. The common ones are history, geography, cultural anthropology, sociology, area studies, or an integrated approach. Area

studies often are written by political scientists or have an emphasis on politics. In multi-authored texts, subject emphasis in different chapters may be uneven, with different specialists writing different sections. If historical, is the emphasis on ancient or traditional culture or modern culture? Ideally, it should be balanced. Obviously, it is important for both teachers and students to know the particular orientation of the text.

2. Maps

Do they relate to the text? For example, in *Global Insights*, the text discusses the importance and location of rivers in India and China, but none of the rivers is labeled on the series of maps that follows. Also check to see if the maps are current and accurate.

3. Cultural Differences

The critical question for any textbook describing other cultures is: How are cultural differences explained?

First, does the text acknowledge that differences exist? It should.

Second, are those differences seen as the result of a complex interaction of history, natural resources, economic and political systems, values, religion, geography, and other factors? Some texts are weakened by a simplistic cause and effect analysis. For example, only history accounts

for differences.

Third, are those differences discussed without prejudice? Too often all differences are analyzed in terms of the United States; a voice is adopted of "we" versus "they". *Global History* comes very close to doing just that with a tone of European superiority. The book begins with chapters on "Europe Unites the World,"



TWO POPULAR METHODS OF TEXTBOOK SELECTION.

"Europe Dominates the World," and "Europe's Decline and Triumph." The other areas of the world are studied in light of Europe's scientific and political innovations.

Another possible bias of some texts is to present Europe always in conflict with Third World countries. For example, Europeans are seen as the only colonial aggressors in modern history; colonialism on the part of the U.S., Soviet Union, Japan, or China is ignored. Some texts also present all problems in the Third World as caused by colonial experiences.

Are the behaviors in countries other than Canada, the U.S., and Europe seen as exotic or strange? *Global Insights* occasionally suggests that other countries have dress codes, strange eating habits, and exotic customs of gift-giving as if none exist in the U.S. Do authors really believe that a corporate lawyer in New York or Washington, D.C. can wear anything she likes to the office? Examples that avoid this prejudice include a discussion of the Shang dynasty in China where a question "was inscribed on a polished piece of bone or shell, and heat applied to the bone to make it crack. The shape, arrangement and direction of the cracks were interpreted for the 'Yes' or 'No' answer. Similarly, teacups and palms are 'read' in the United States today for answer to questions about the future" (*Global History*, p. 312). A caption under a picture reads "This [doctor] is using acupuncture anesthesia. This form of anesthesia has sparked much interest among doctors in the United States and Europe" (p. 365). In explaining a culture trait, *World Geography Today* notes that "a typical American teenager eats dinner with a knife, fork, and spoon. However, a typical Chinese teenager eats with chopsticks, and Malaysian teenagers are comfortable eating with their fingers. Nonetheless, each trait is considered the best method in its own culture" (p. 87).

An imbalance between urban and rural life is another possible bias. In addition, a text should not have people from a particular country or even continent, for that matter, presented as the same throughout the country. Similarly, differences may be seen only in monolithic terms such as Christians versus Moslem areas or a global "East Asia" combining China and Japan. In *Global*

Insights, a sari is supposed to identify a person from India, yet clothing of Indian women differs greatly by region.

Another problem is that differences may be seen as existing only in the past. *Global Insights* implies that if people from China, Japan, and Africa had different histories all those people would be just like us. If only the British had never entered the picture, the Chinese (and the Africans--who are treated as if they are all the same) would be like the Americans. This suggests that there are no substantive differences in values among peoples of the world. Does a balance exist between the views of outsiders and insiders. For example, *Global Insights* uses primary source material including some written by natives of the region under discussion. In the section on India, for example, the quotations are extremely well-balanced including observations by both native and outside scholars.

In spite of the emphasis so far on understanding cultural differences, a multicultural text should not only emphasize differences. Any student should come away from her reading able to answer just how the other peoples differ from Americans and how they are the same.

Alison Brooks
JoAnne Lanouette